

# 50 year adventure

Travels from Virginia to India  
and everywhere in between



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Rick Evans

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For my mother but I must also thank another,  
For my wife who has known me over half my life.



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# 1. Introduction

It may not be obvious why someone like myself would write my memoir. I am not a famous person. I am not a professional athlete. I am not a politician. I am not even known in my local area of North Carolina. I do not fit into any of these typical categories of autobiographical writers. However, as in most people, I have a story to tell that is unique from many and common to some. We all have stories that people can relate to and sympathize with, if only we just tell them. I find a great relief when I learn that others have survived similar struggles that I am going through. I am living proof that it is possible to live through many things and come out the other side a better person.

One of the reasons why I am writing this book is to help my wife and children understand who I am through my past life experiences. So much of my life today is a result of past events, both good and bad. Some of the bad things I wanted to avoid at all costs but I must have passed on these bad genes to my children as I see them making the same mistakes that I made when I was their age. Maybe this book will prevent our yet to be born grand children from repeating them – I can only hope. I would never have started such a huge undertaking if I did not think this book could help someone somewhere. Some days I feel like I started out a “nobody” and outside my own power I became a “somebody”. I will let you judge that one for yourself after reading my book!

Looking back over my first fifty years of life, it seems amazing to me the path my life has taken. I never imagined it would have turned out like this. The first eighteen years were spent in the rural mountains of Virginia where my view of the world was very small. There were a couple of events that I still remember from childhood that were directly applicable in my later years.

I remember the meal time motivational saying, “Eat all of your food as there are children starving in India”. I never knew anything about India, so that did not force me to eat vegetables I did not like. I never fully contemplated what statement meant as a child or teenager. I realize now that eating or not eating the food placed in front

of me really makes little difference in the grand scheme of the world food supply. While in India, I daily saw starving people and it was shocking to my system, so I clearly need to be more grateful for every meal placed in front of me.

When very young, I recall attending church one evening when a missionary couple from the Congo was visiting. It was so odd hearing about things happening so far away in Africa. I just did not relate to why they wanted to go to such a far away place or what they were doing while they were there. As I watched the slide show presentation of photos they had taken, it seemed real enough but just too strange for me to comprehend. The other odd thing is that I did not remember anyone in our church ever talking about missions or people in other countries, so how the Congo missionaries had anything to do with our local church did not make sense either.

I heard once that a woman who lived near us had a son who was a dry wall expert working in Saudi Arabia. It seemed like such an odd place to want to work, when he could have done the same job in nearby towns or even large cities like Richmond, VA or Washington D.C. Why did he want to go so far from home? I never found the answers to these questions nor did I ever talk to him in person. At the time, these events meant nothing to me personally and I quickly forgot about them as I lived for the moment on our small farm, where the Allegheny wilderness were just a couple of miles away, which is as far as I wanted to venture.

Other than these mysteriously unrelated events, as a family we took weekly Sunday drives into the mountains or on an unexplored road we had not been on before. We must have driven on every road in Augusta County during my childhood and surely we must have repeated several of them many times. Most of the time I was only happy when we stopped so I could freely roam around the woods. Occasionally we crossed the five mountain peaks on our way to visit relatives of our next door neighbors. They lived next to the West Virginia border and owned a huge sheep farm. The trip seemed like it took forever and I always got car sick. To me they were mountain people who were very different from the people I was with in school.

During the summer we drove even further as our vacations were normally spent visiting Civil War battle fields in Virginia and the surrounding states. My sister and I never were very fond of these vacations as they were uninteresting history lessons. The only vacation I remember that was not historical in nature was our visit to Disney World in Florida the year it opened. The only problem was we never got into the park, but that is a story in itself.

Upon entering my teenage years, many things changed. I dreamed of a career in the NBA from the time I started playing basketball at seven years old. I played basketball in our driveway in all weather – rain, sleet, snow, hot and cold. I practiced my skills daily for hours on end, mostly by myself. I took time out to play football, which I also loved, and sometimes baseball, but it had to be forced upon me as I did not enjoy that sport. When everyone else kept growing with age, I remained at five and a half feet, so my NBA dreams quickly vanished. My mother told me to be patient as I would grow into my feet one day, but in my impatience I did not believe her. In the meantime, I took up cross country running as I enjoyed being on the country dirt roads and crossing the surrounding local farm fields. When I entered high school, all I wanted to do was run away and be anywhere else than my home town. I kept running for the exercise, but I gave up on all other sports as a potential career. When I was close to graduating from high school, I asked my mother what she thought I should do for a career. She told me to pick something I enjoyed doing. From a very young age I enjoyed art and took lessons from an artist friend of my mother's. I just had no idea what I would do with my life. That was when my life became interesting and the adventure began.



# Section One

## Growing up in rural Virginia



## 2. Early Childhood

What is your earliest childhood memory? I can tell you what I don't remember. I was born in Kansas City, Missouri at St. Joseph's Medical Center near Overland Park. Because Kansas City is located in both Kansas and Missouri, St. Joseph's was the nearest general hospital to where my parents lived at the time. Only once do I recall returning to see the house of my birth as I was very young during that trip. We returned to the area for my grandfather's retirement party in Shidler, Oklahoma. We visited our previous next door neighbors while in Kansas City as they still lived in the same house. I remember their pet raccoon as it was the most unusual pet I had ever seen. It stayed inside their house, but I was clearly told not to get too friendly with it since it would unknowingly scratch strangers with its very sharp claws. They had a fake climbing post in the living room, which simulated a real tree on which the raccoon was perched when I first saw it. Since the time of that visit, the whole area has been paved and turned into a series of car dealerships. That news does not cause me any emotional distress as I have no other memories of living in Kansas City. I did have another odd connection to that area. A coworker in Texas found out during a company celebration of employee birthdays that we were born the same day. That was kind of strange in itself, but when I had heard him tell someone else he was born in Kansas City, I asked him the name of the hospital where he was born. He replied that it was the very same hospital where I had come into the world. We might have been in the same nursery at the same time fighting over who got the next bottle of milk. This is just one of the many strange coincidences that have been a part of my life.

My earliest memory in life was a trip from Kansas to Virginia. It is one of those things that you don't know why you remember it out of so many lifelong events, but you just do. Our white Ford station wagon was convenient for traveling long distances. In the back, we had a steel wire dog cage to transport our German short-haired pointer named Jake on the long trip to our new home in Virginia. I clearly remember riding through the West Virginia Allegheny Mountains with a wide

crystal blue stream to the left of our car. Maybe it was the first time I had seen mountains or maybe I was in the cage with the dog to entertain myself. After graduating from college I passed through that very same mountain pass and it brought back that unusual memory for some very odd reason. The area along the river had rolling hills with a smattering of trailers and a few old broken down abandoned homes. Every few miles a huge mansion appeared on the top of one of the hills with a great view of the river below. This was a remote part of the country with raw scenic beauty, but an odd place for a young toddler to remember.

The purpose of the trip was to relocate our few belongings, which was caused partially by our family being given a free two acre lot next to the home where my mother was born. On our first visit to our unfinished new house, we ran around the property and explored the half completed shell of a house. We temporarily lived in the middle of the Shenandoah Valley for over a year, waiting for our house to be completed, but I don't remember anything at all during that time. The rest of my memories all began when we moved into our new house in Churchville, Virginia in 1963.

## **Bob-boo and Grandma**

Even though my mother's parents lived in Churchville, I always thought of my next door neighbors as being my grandparents. My mother had a special attachment to them since she was born in their upstairs bedroom and was raised in their house. I called them Bob-boo and Grandma. He fought in France during WWI and contracted mumps at the ripe old age of nineteen which made him sterile, so they never had kids of their own. In their eyes I was the grandson they never had. The love was mutual. I only heard Bob-boo speak once of his time in the French fox hole trenches. He was so emotional during the two hour story that he cried on and off the whole time. I never asked him about his time in WWI again. We had a special bond as he taught me everything about living on a farm and how to be self sufficient. He taught me the proper way to use a hammer, how to plant the garden, how to paint, how to feed the chickens and so much more. Every time

I tried to do something new, he was there to help me learn how to do it properly. Some days I ate lunch or dinner with them and then slept in their upstairs guest bedroom for the night. I played dominoes or Chinese checkers with them, but usually they had a puzzle on the card table next to the fireplace in the living room which kept us busy for hours on end. We sat next to hearth to keep warm while toiling on the puzzle and talking about life. I never saw Bob-boo get angry with anyone and he was always extremely patient with me; he personified what a follower of Jesus should be like. On the other hand, Grandma had a temper and was mean to people at times, but was never harsh to me. As a youngster I spent most of my time outside working in their garden or at their house helping them with chores. In looking back, I wonder what my father was doing then as he was not in my memories. It never really mattered to me, as Bob-boo was a grandfather, father and friend to me. As a teenager, I still remember the days around his death. I just could not force myself to attend his funeral as I wanted to be alone. I went for a hike with my dog to my favorite place - Elliot's Knob. I felt so lonely to have lost someone I loved so much and I cried most of the way up to the top of the mountain. The only comfort I found was enjoying the hike and seeing the beauty from the top; other than that I really did not want to go back to our house and face the thought of Bob-boo not being in the house next door.

## **Games**

At an early age my sister and I liked to do puzzles, and I have to think much of it had to do with the influence of Bob-boo and Grandma. Both of us had a special gift with puzzles. After conquering every puzzle we were given, the challenges of putting individual puzzles together was way too easy for us. We took all of our puzzles and mixed them together. We then built the individual puzzles from the big pile of pieces. Another game we really enjoyed for endless hours was Parcheesi. There was an elderly woman on the other side of Churchville who we visited often and she always wanted to play this game. When we rolled the dice she never counted the spaces as she knew how far the numbers on the dice would take us and she pointed

to the space where we need to move to. Many years later I learned that this game was originally from India, but at the time I only associated it with this other adopted grandmother. While my sister enjoyed Barbies, I took the traditional route and favored my G.I. Joe. My father worked at a pipe organ company which mostly used solid dark walnut. He had a small walnut box made for me where I stored all of my G.I. Joe uniforms. One of my favorite things from a very young age was to complete each page in color books using crayons. It was like an art canvas for me. I was never content on just completely filling in the page with color, it had to look like a work of art. The type of color book never mattered to me, but I had to have a plentiful supply of different colors to complete my crayon masterpieces. I always looked forward to a new set of crayons at Christmas. I don't ever remember throwing away a single crayon as I kept them all in a tall cylindrical oatmeal container for safe keeping. During Christmas we hand made our own ornaments and melted the extra small crayon scraps to create custom candles. I felt like a true artist.

## **Basement**

We had a small black and white TV in the basement that was connected to an antenna mounted on the side of the house. There was a knob on top of the TV which we turned and then patiently waited for the antenna to turn to match that position on the knob. It sounds archaic now, but was very simple to operate. There was a TV station in Richmond and one in Washington D.C. that came in clearly. To switch channels we got up out of the chair and moved the knob and waited to see if another station had anything worth viewing. We kept the green sheet part of the Saturday newspaper next to the TV so we had an idea of what was on the other channels since changing the TV antenna was not convenient. We had a special UHF antenna mounted on the back of the TV which enabled us to get the local PBS station for educational shows. I mostly watched TV on Friday evenings and Saturday mornings. Some days I watched children shows in the afternoon after school. I mostly remember riding my tricycle around the concrete basement floor while my mother did the laundry or ironing. We used a very old ringer washer in the basement. After the clothes were clean

they had to be manually inserted one at a time through the ringer which squeezed the water out of the clothes. We then hung them out to dry on the metal clothes lines in our backyard. I enjoyed the days when mom hung out the bed sheets as I hid between them pretending they were my fort. My mother often brought out a picnic lunch for me as a slight interruption to my other worldly adventure in which I was totally absorbed. In the summer months we took out our antique sheet metal tubs and filled them with water and played in them near the laundry lines. Such simple pleasures brought endless fun.

Even though I daily went into the basement to watch TV and to play, I was scared to go down there at night. That was unusual since I spent so much time during the day playing in it. All the toys and puzzles were down there next to the chest freezer and hot water heater on the unfinished side of the basement. There was a large furnace on the far wall opposite from our toy shelf. For some strange reason I always thought there was a monster behind the furnace waiting to get me. I had to turn the light on at the top of the stairs before I went down the steps. I had to close the door going down into the basement before I fell asleep as my room was right across the hall from that door. I realized that any monster coming up from the basement would naturally get me first since I was closest to the door. Once I got down the steps into the basement the only way I went into the unfinished part of the basement was to turn on all the lights first. If I wanted to get something out of the chest freezer, then I had to turn on the light and quickly open the freezer, get what I needed and quickly leave. I ran up the stairs to give my mother what she needed out of the freezer or ran to the other side of the basement where the TV was located and only after turning on all the lights and TV did I feel safe. Even as a teenager I never liked going down into the dark basement.

## **Snow**

One of the requirements when it snowed was to build a snow man in the front yard. If it snowed a lot then I made a family with a snow man, snow woman and snow child. A couple of times I built a snow fort, but that required too much snow which did not happen every year.

The most important snow activity of all was locating the perfect hill to sled down. We had a slight hill on one side of our house near our dwarf fruit trees. When I was very young this was perfect as I slid all the way to the back yard fence. As I got older I needed more exciting places to sled. Our neighbors across the road had more serious hills, but they required caution as the hills made me go right into the road. One of the houses across the street was the manse for the church we attended. The boys were my basketball buddies, so I was invited to their front yard which had a slow gradual hill parallel to the road. When I need a real adrenaline rush, I went down to the elementary school which had a huge hill above the playground. If we had a deep snow, this was the perfect place in Churchville for sledding. Many of the village kids gathered with their sleds and went down the hill all day long or until we got too cold to stand being outside. Above the baseball field next to the school was an even steeper hill, but off to one side of that hill was a long gradual slope that was excellent as well. It required even deeper snow since the hill was not mowed and was infrequently used and required snow deep enough to mash down the long field grass. I had one friend at the opposite end of the village who had the best hill of all. At the very bottom of his hill was a small stream so we had to be very careful to get off the sled early as the drop into the stream was a couple of feet. It was over a mile walk to his house so I only went a couple of times. The most exciting thing about visiting his house was that they had a sled toboggan that fit four people. After we got tired of racing each other down the hill in our sleds, four of us climbed on the toboggan and went super fast together. The person in the front was responsible for steering and telling every one else when to jump off. We all looked forward to snow days to get out of school class and be the first to sled!

## **Elementary School**

The elementary school in Churchville was about a quarter of a mile from our house by bus. I walked to school every day so I had to find a faster way to get there. I walked through our neighbors adjoining field along the top of their hill to avoid the cows on their field. I walked back home a different way. If it rained then I wore a bright yellow

raincoat with hood and rain boots. I never minded the walk as I got home faster than anyone who rode the bus. One of the school buses stopped at the curve in the road right next to our house, but I never road on it. The main building of our elementary school was very old. My mother went to elementary through high school in the same building. The gym was in the middle of the building. By the time I attended, they built a new section for first through fourth grades. The fifth, sixth and seventh graders were in the old building since they used the gym for P.E. I attended an optional kindergarten in a private home near the elementary school with ten other children. We all graduated from the same high school many years later. In today's ever changing environment, it is hard to imagine knowing someone all thirteen years of school life. I had severe learning problems in the first grade so the early kindergarten did give me jump on school like it was supposed to do. My mother somehow found out that I had dyslexia and worked with me throughout the year to help me conquer my reading problem. I was a constant irritation to my first grade teacher, so much so I recall visiting her house with my mother to straighten out the issues. From first grade through fourth grade we stayed in the same classroom all day long except for playground recess and lunch in the cafeteria. There were eight classrooms in the building with two classrooms for each grade. The only activity I can remember during elementary days was chasing some of the girls around the monkey bars on the playground and if I caught them they were supposed to give me a kiss. That seems odd for first graders but I grew out of liking girls quickly after the first grade. By the third grade the school system divided all the students into two groups. The "smart" and "dumb" classes which we cruelly called them. Looking back, it seems like such a cruel way to run a school system.

Breakfast before school was always important to me. Even though our neighbors provided us with fresh milk in exchange for our fresh chicken eggs, that never helped me. I was allergic to milk from birth, and my mother had to constantly cook around my lactose intolerance problems. It affected me most during my breakfast. I enjoyed eating cereal but clearly milk was unacceptable to my stomach, so I used many kinds of different juice instead. I poured

Hawaiian Fruit Punch or Hi-C from half gallon tin cans on my cereal. At other times I made Tang and used it. My preference was always orange juice but I liked the variety of using any juice that my mother cared to buy and she definitely mixed up the choices just for me. When my friends came over, they were always shocked to see me eat my cereal this way. I was fifteen years old when I first tried milk on cereal. I found the taste really bad at first so I tried it only a couple of times a week at first until I found it edible.

By the fifth grade we started to rotate to different classrooms for every class period. My favorite elementary teachers were the seventh grade science and history teachers since they were also the basketball coaches. The most boring class ever for me was the seventh grade Bible class, which was held during health class once a month. There were a couple of other events in the seventh grade of note. At the end of the school year the teachers played a basketball game against all the seventh grade students. The teachers had never lost and of course we thought we would be the first grade to ever beat them. It was a grand event for the whole school. I had a girlfriend for most of the year, which meant nothing else than I had her picture in my room and was infatuated with her the whole year. I took her to the school dances but it was a challenge to dance with her in front of others. I never held her hand in public or even thought of kissing her. When she broke up with me to date an older boy in high school it completely devastated my life. It did not help matters that the boy was one of the bullies who constantly made fun of me and came up with my “mayor” nickname. That may not seem like the harshest name in the world, but the name was a put down as they thought my father tried to run the town. They were on a mission to make me constantly feel bad as they thought my father ordered everyone around. They made sure no adults were in sight when they made fun of me and pushed me around to intimidate me to fear them. Most of them were more than five years older than me and they seemed like giants to me and I was very scared of them catching me alone and hurting me. It never occurred to me they were just talking and had no intent on physically harming me.

It was during the seventh grade that bullying became a part of my life. I was constantly harassed by kids who were in couple of grades

higher than me. On the baseball and software field next to the elementary school, nightly church softball games were held during the week. Teams from all over the northwestern district of Augusta County came to play each other on the field. I had to be careful during the games to avoid looking at or speaking to the boys who took it upon themselves to bully me. One time they provoked a new kid in the village to pick a fight with me. After a couple of weeks, I decided I had no choice but to fight this boy to get some kind of respect as the bullying was not getting any lesser over time. One night we met by the elementary school playground in the grass. We both did not know how to fight so it was a sad show for the older kids who collected around us. We both landed some punches and he gave up first so the fight did not last long. The fight made no difference at all as the bullying continued. The only good thing from the fight was that I became friends with the person I was setup to fight with and we hung around each other the remaining part of the year and into the next summer.

## **Church**

With a village name of Churchville it was only natural that everyone attended church. Our family went to the Presbyterian church mostly because our adopted grandparents went to that church. Most of the children I grew up with either went to our church or the United Methodist church on the other side of the village. We attended Sunday School before church every week. For me the crafts during Sunday school were fun and I always showed them to my mother to hear her praise my work. There were four of us who knew each other from kindergarten and attended all the church functions together. I was part of the children's choir and stopped by the church on the way home from school as it was about half way to my house. The choir director tried to make us sound angelic and she was the funeral director's spouse. She had a great voice and sang beautiful solos on Sundays. I can still to this day remember the words to some of those youth choir hymns. When I hear those hymns on the radio or in church I immediately think of those days singing in the choir. During church I liked to get the church bulletin and draw all kinds of things in the empty spaces between the words. I found out that one of the other kids

my age did the same thing so some Sundays we sat together and had a drawing contest. In all the years I attended that church, I never remember anyone talking about people needing to “accept Jesus” or to be “saved” or to be “born again”. I only remember sermons about being kind and considerate to other people. I never went to church because I liked it, but I went because I never had a choice otherwise. I enjoyed dressing up each Easter with my new bow tie and a suit jacket. Every Christmas we had a candle light service for the whole village in one of the four churches in town on a rotating basis. This was the only time we set foot in the other churches, except for some years I went to Vacation Bible School in the United Methodist church, which was by far the largest church of the four. As far as Bibles go, the only one I saw was the one my mother kept next to her bed on the shelf. It was well worn so I assumed someone had to be reading it. I looked at it sometimes but lost interest as it did not have any pictures. The other Christian influences of note were the classic TV movies we watched yearly like “Ben Hur”, “The Ten Commandments” and “The Greatest Story Ever Told”. Most of what I knew about Christianity came from watching these movies and the crafts I did in Sunday School.

### **3. Life on a small farm**

One of the best things about living on a farm is the available land for roaming and exploring. As a family we only owned a little over an acre, but our adopted grandparents next door had five acres. Our neighbors behind us had a 300+ acre daily farm which were almost all Guernsey cows and a few large hogs. They had to wake up at 4 a.m. to feed the cows and tend to the farm before leaving for full time jobs to help pay for the upkeep of the farm. Our farm was hardly a farm compared to their operation, but we traded them our fresh eggs for their fresh milk and sometimes a side of beef for their pork. Their farm was on the other side of Whiskey Creek, which ran down the back side of our property. When I mention “our farm” I really mean my adopted grandparent's land, which I helped them take care of by doing chores.

#### **Animals**

We did not have large quantities of livestock but had a little of everything. We had animals to help sustain us as we raised all of our own food. We typically had five black Angus cattle at any give time. Every year we took the oldest one to the farm bureau on the east of Staunton and it provided the meat we needed for the rest of the year between our family of four and our adopted grandparents. We let the butcher take part of it as his pay so we did not have to pay any money up front for his hard labor. This was the same location where we bought feed for our cattle and horses as we loaded up in mass quantities for the whole year in a single trip. We always bailed the hay from our own fields with the help of our next door neighbor and then stored the hay in our small barn. We used the hay to feed the cows and horses in the winter when the ground froze, but we bought extra grain to keep the cows fat during the cold winter months. We also had a wooden box where we supplied a big block of salt for the cows to lick when they got the urge. We had a Shetland pony which I don't recall anyone ever riding or even paying much attention to him in the many years we had him. We had a Palomino horse named Kerry. She was very wild and could only be ridden by my mother. I remember one

time my father tried to get on her and she violently threw him off the minute he made her move. My mother loved horses and we tried to take Kerry to a horse trainer but she still only allowed mom to ride her.

We had a chicken coup and normally had around twenty chickens along with one rooster. Every morning we went into the coup and looked to eggs. We had both white and brown eggs and we never did figure out which chickens laid the brown ones and which one laid the white ones. I always knew the difference when I ate them and I always preferred brown ones. Once a week we refilled the oyster shells in a box next to the coup door. We knew when the oyster shells were getting low as the egg shells broke easily when we picked them up out of the hay nests. The nests were along the back wall of the coup and most chickens used the same nest every night. Some of the sly chickens laid eggs in random places outside of the coup in the grass or in places that were hard to reach in the coup, so egg hunting was a daily game for me. Occasionally the eggs turned up in the cart when we left a small amount of hay in it. When we got tired of eating hamburgers and steak, we cooked one of the chickens that we thought was not laying eggs. Every spring around Easter time we bought a litter of baby chicks from a local breeder to replenish the stock. I never liked the whole process of killing chickens, but I never minded eating fresh chicken meat. I was elected to kill the chickens, which meant I had to catch one of them first. Once caught, they made so much noise it was hard to hear myself think and they constantly flapped their wings trying to get away. I then had to maneuver them onto the chopping block, which was just a piece of wood with two old rusty nails sticking out of the top. I had to quickly get the chicken's neck between the two nails and chop the head off before I got scratched or the chicken got away. Then I had to pluck the feathers out by hand. The last part was the worst as I had to burn trash in our fifty gallon metal barrel and then lightly burn the rest of the feathers from the chicken, which did not smell very good at all. I plucked the remaining feathers by hand until the chicken was perfectly clean. After doing this innumerable times I should have become a vegetarian as it was never fun for me.

My adopted grandmother's brother owned a large sheep farm in Highland County. Every summer we drove across the multiple mountain tops to visit them. Uncle William was amazing in that he tended the huge 400+ acre farm with only a single arm. When he was in his twenties his shirt sleeve got caught in a hay baler and he lost his left arm near his shoulder. It was amazing what he could do with one arm and he was a very small man similar in stature to my adopted grandmother as they were both under five feet tall. When his sheep had twin lambs in the spring, he brought them to us. For some odd reason when sheep have twins they abandon one of them and will only allow one to nurse. My sister and I raised the sheep like pets. My sister preferred the black lambs and I got the white ones. We had a green house attached to the back of the house which had a heater in it and this is where we kept the lambs while they were young. We fed them using green 7-Up bottles with a special liquid feed that was yellowish in color that we got from the feed store. The smell was so strong and unique that I can still smell it. Once the sheep got large enough to walk on their own, we let them run around on the lawn in temporary chicken wire pens. Eventually they got promoted to running freely in the field next to our house. Some of the lambs became true pets. One of them I named Victor after the book I had read called "Frankenstein". He was the craziest sheep I ever had. He ran after me in the field while I practiced football and came up behind me and butted me with his horns. I constantly had to keep a watch out for him to make sure he never came up behind me without me knowing it. When I first came out into the field he came slowly trotting towards me and rub up against me like a dog. That was the hardest year of all for me to take him to sell at the stock yard. Some of the buyers bought sheep for the wool and others to slaughter them for the meat. I never wanted to know what happened to my lambs after I sold them. One of the first things we did when the young lambs grew up was to put a special rubber band around their tails to make them fall off. They got a much higher price in the stock yard without a tail; otherwise, I did not like that seemingly torturous process even though I was told that the sheep never felt a thing. The scariest moment we had with any sheep was when one of the lambs got Tetanus. After the lamb refused to eat for a

week, we suspected something was wrong. Finally we found that his jaw was locked shut and we could not feed him. We called the local veterinarian for help and that is when we learned the whole family had to get Tetanus shots. The lamb died but I must have blocked out the memory as I don't recall what we did with the highly contagious body.

To hold the hay we bailed each fall, we had an unusual looking barn. It was not your typical barn from farms in rural Virginia. Ours was about one hundred feet long and twenty feet deep and twenty feet high. The roof sloped down in the back, so that the rear of the barn was about fifteen feet high. On the right side of the barn was a stable with a manager where we placed the hay for the cows and horses to snack at their leisure. Once a year I was elected to clean this part of the barn where I completely disposed of all manure down to the mud floor and then clean the manager thoroughly. I also tidied up the hay bails on the other side of the barn. If any of the bailing twine was broken I moved those hay bails to the front to feed the livestock first. I was normally the cause of broken bails as I loved to climb all over the hay and pretend battles were waging against my fictitious enemies. I remember spending hours on end exploring every part of that barn.

One of my least favorite tasks of life on the farm was cleaning the chicken coup. I nearly always got sick after cleaning it which was probably some form of aviary flu. Besides the fact that chicken manure smelled really bad, it only got worse when I stirred it up trying to get the coup clean. My adopted grandfather always helped me clean it. One side of the coup had chicken wire on it with plastic sheeting on the outside to keep the inside dry. The chicken roost was elevated off the floor and had a series of round wooden rods on the top so the chickens could rest on them. After clearing the whole coup down to the concrete floor, we went down to the local wood mill and gather up several bags of wood shavings and put them in empty burlap feed bags. We filled the whole coup floor with fresh wood shavings which made it smell very good. We changed all the hay in the beds where the chickens laid eggs. Once we were done, the chickens cautiously returned in the coup. They clawed and dug around in the new shavings as if inspecting the work we had done. I was glad that this only had to be done once a year.

We threw all of our table scraps into the chicken yard and I liked to watch the chickens go wild with excitement over the new food. They really liked the corn cobs as they picked and picked at them to remove the extra corn we left over in the cobs. Every couple of weeks I went into the yard and picked up the left over totally clean corn cobs and took them over to our neighbor to give to his hogs. Near the chicken yard was the feed house. We kept all the feed bags for the horses and cows in this small ten foot by eight foot shed. All the tools from pitch forks to axes were also kept in this shed. If I ever needed any tool I knew exactly where to find it as I was always told to put everything back in the same place I got it. Since all the grain was kept in the feed house, the barrels had to be sealed tight to prevent the field mice from coming in and eating through the burlap sacks and consuming all the feed. We had several fifty gallon drums each holding a different kind of feed. One for the chickens and one for the cows and horses. Almost every time I went into the shed I saw a mouse as they loved the smell of food in there.

## **Whiskey Creek**

We had two interesting features on our small farm. One them was called a mill race. We had a small twenty foot high dam on Whiskey Creek that ran through the back of our property. I often walked across the top of the dam and crossed to the other side as there was a thick wood board attached to the metal parts of the dam. I had to walk slowly on this board and hold onto a metal bar that straddled the dam, since I was afraid of heights. It was always a challenge to cross the dam even though it was quite small. Next to the dam was a small concrete shoot with a metal door that controlled the flow of water through a channel of water called the mill race. It was fifteen feet wide and three feet deep stream that flowed to the wood mill to the east of our lot. The mill had a huge water wheel over which the water flowed and in turn drove the wood equipment inside. This was owned by a relative of our adopted grandparents. He ran the mill for many years as a way to make wonderful solid walnut furniture. The thick rubber belt connected to the external water wheel was two feet wide and over twenty feet long. When connected to the water wheel the belt was a

dangerous contraption as it loosely flowed over the gears that drove the large floor saw to plain the raw tree planks. There were many small table saws throughout the mill to refine the wood even further. I really enjoyed looking around the mill when it was not in use and inspected the wood pieces left all over the floor. The total length of the mill race was around one hundred yards straight from the dam and then it took a hard right turn and went another hundred yards to the mill. We had an aluminum fishing boat that I paddled back and forth on the mill race which brought endless hours of pleasure. Sometimes I moved it from the mill race to Whiskey Creek by dragging it in the grass but the creek was much shorter length and not as much fun. To keep our acre size garden well watered during the hot and dry summer months we had a gas powered water pump running from the sharp bend of the mill race to our garden over two hundred yards away. We found many useful purposes for the water in the mill race.

Another unique part of the dam was a hydraulic ram pump. On the lower side of the dam about twenty feet from the dam was a fifteen foot deep square hole in the bank on our side of the creek. It had an opening at the bottom of the hole to let in water that flowed over the dam. The power of the water pouring over the dam drove the pump to continuously move. I was little more than long metal plank that was anchored at one end and the other end moved up a couple of inches forcing the water to be pumped hundreds of yards under our land and up an adjacent hill to a storage tank. Those neighbors irrigated their garden from an elevated storage tank using natural gravity to apply the water pressure. Yearly I was sent to check on this ram pump, which also forced me to face my fears. The cover for the square hole was a tin metal wooden framed box. It was a bit heavy, so I lifted it up slightly and then flipped it over. The cover always had a snake or two living in the insulated top. I dreaded seeing them although I knew they were harmless water snakes.

The creek also supplied endless hours of entertainment for fishing. There was a large willow tree on the edge of the creek where I sat and fished for two large sucker fish that I saw swimming in the deep water under the tree roots. Since the fish are so full of bones, they were not typically eaten, but I was only interested in the sport of

catching them. I caught them over and over as I always threw them back in the creek. Finally one year after a huge flood in the area, the creek overflowed the banks and the fish were washed over the dam and I never saw them again. Normally once a year our whole farm flooded with water when the creek overflowing the small banks. I put on my rubber boots and went out into the deepest part of the water in the field and caught night crawlers for my future fishing adventures. I put them in a composite pile at the back of the house, so when I needed them later I found them easily. It was fun just walking around in the foot deep water. During some winters the low parts of the farm, where the water gathered, froze so I walked around on the ice in my boots. I also got the snow sled out and ran as fast as I could and then threw myself on the sled and slid across the ice as far as I could or until I hit a clump of grass sticking up through the ice. Such were the small treasures of farm life on a creek.

## **Garden**

One of the best and worst things of living in the country is that we had a huge garden. Between my adopted grandparent's house and ours was a half acre garden. Later on we added another half acre on the other side of our house just for growing corn. The best thing was that we had fresh food all summer long and seldom used anything from the local grocery store. The worst thing was that I had to weed them both. If I was hungry and wanted a snack I went into the garden and picked a ripe tomato or pulled up a carrot. Some times I picked a few peas and ate the shelled peas raw. I tried the same thing with lima beans but they tasted a little bitter to me. Other times I pulled off an ear of corn, shucked it and munched away on the uncooked corn. Every couple of weeks we had a mini harvest and froze the extras for the winter months. We picked a bushel of green string beans and methodically pulled off the strings and snapped them. We blanched them and sealed them in half gallon glass bell jars in water and stored them in the basement. For the shelled peas and lima beans we put them in small sandwich size plastic bags and put them in the chest freezer in our basement. The corn was the biggest challenge as the husks had to be removed and all the silk removed from each ear. We had a special hard

bristle brush to help us with that task. We then slightly cooked the ears in a big pot on the kitchen stove and after draining the boiling water, we used a small paring knife to remove the corn from the ears into a large deep dish metal pan. My task was normally to take this corn and put into individual small plastic bags which were taken immediately to the chest freezer downstairs. Looking back it seems like we were always canning and freezing stuff all summer long, but we all enjoyed the benefits during the winter months as we ate the fruits of our summer labors.

My least favorite canning task was making pickles. I really liked cucumbers raw so the thought of turning these delicious vegetables into horrible pickles was not a happy thought. I did not like the smell of vinegar, but did not mind the dill spice we added to them. Everyone else enjoyed the pickles all winter long especially my adopted grandparents, so I was never bothered by the task of making pickles even though the smell was overwhelming at times. We canned different things at the same time so the pressure cooker constantly whistled over the weekend. We stewed tomatoes and sealed them in half gallon jars. We picked grapes off the vine next to our wood pile and made grape juice from the purple muscadine grapes.

My favorite time of the year was making applesauce and frozen peaches. We had several dwarf apple, peach and plum trees lining the East side of our house which we picked mostly in the fall months. The peaches were a bit easier to peel as we heated them slightly on the electric kitchen stove and the skin came right off with little effort. We sliced them in a mixing bowl and added some white sugar. It was tempting to eat them all on the spot as they tasted so good when they were fresh. We saved plastic butter containers throughout the year and filled them with the peaches and froze them in the chest freezer. The apples were more of a challenge as the skin had to be peeled by hand and the seeds cut out. We then cooked them in a huge pot of water on the stove until the apples disintegrated. The water was drained and the apples put in a sieve. The sieve was a cone shaped aluminum pan that had hundreds of small holes in it. It came with a stand that was placed over a mixing bowl and a pointed wooden roller. As the roller was rotated inside the sieve the apples became applesauce. We filled square

pint plastic containers and put them in the chest freezer also. These two tasks were my favorite things since I was the primary recipient of the frozen food. In the winter months, while watching TV during the weekends, I opened the containers of frozen applesauce and peaches and slowly devoured them by the cast iron pot bellied stove. Yet another case of slowly enjoying the fruit of my hard work during the summer months.

Around one-fourth of our garden was potatoes. They provided the staple food for the winter months. In the spring we used the left over potatoes from the previous year for the new year's planting. Some of the shriveled up old potatoes had very long new growths so it was obvious where to cut the potato eyes. A single potato provided about five plants by cutting them into pieces with a single eye per piece. Some years we went to the local store and bought a bag of potatoes for planting when we had none left for the spring planting. Digging up the potatoes in the fall was fun but challenging. I used a spading fork to dig them up but I had to make sure I went far away from the center of the plant and dug deep as to not fork the potatoes. If I accidentally dug into a potato then it was eaten that evening or next day or else it would spoil. Thankfully I did not do this often or else we had to go without potatoes during the long winter months. Later on for a Boy Scout project I tried growing sweet potatoes. It was a huge success as I grew monster potatoes, but the crop was small enough to only be enjoyed immediately as we did not have enough to store for later.

We also had fresh fruit to enjoy during the summer. Lining the garden on the West side of the house was an old blackberry patch. I loved blackberries but picking was quite a challenge. I was determined to get the best ones, instead of letting the birds get them, so I picked them often. I always got scratches on my arms but the taste was worth every scratch. All around the blackberry bushes were very old asparagus plants. I was sent nightly to cut the young plants as they sprouted from the ground near the long blackberry thorns. It was a toss up whether pickles or asparagus was my least favorite vegetable from the garden. I liked finding and cutting the asparagus, but did not like the taste. Every year I let a couple of the asparagus plants grow for seeds to insure the crop was plentiful the next year. Some of the plants grew over four feet tall and looked like small bushy trees. We also had

red raspberries on the other side of the garden but they were fairly old plants and were hard to pick since they were scattered under the trees and intertwined in the fence. Above the raspberry plants was my favorite tree of all, my red cherry tree. I shot birds with my pellet gun to protect my precious cherries. I climbed our old wooden ladder and picked them by hand, but many of them never made it into the bucket as I ate them right away. I took the remaining cherries and blackberries to my mother to make pies, which were just as good as the fresh fruit. Some years we had bountiful crops and I was able to make frozen cherries to be consumed while watching TV in the winter.

## **Free Manual Labor**

My adopted grandparents got their drinking water from their gutters. When I ate at their house, it was always difficult to drink their water and it still sounds disgusting to me. They had two different cisterns. The one closest to the back door had a cast iron antique water pump. It had a metal chain with small metal buckets mounted on the chain. As you moved the pump handle up and down the water eventually came out of the end of the pump and you had cold water. The other cistern at the back of the house was much larger and supplied the water to the house. Most of the gutters fed the large cistern and the smaller cistern with the pump was used for secondary water storage. Yearly when the large cistern was nearly empty, I had to crawl down into it using a long wooden ladder and clean it thoroughly. It was made of stone and was like a huge buried vase that was small at top and round at the bottom. I scrubbed the walls with a brush and rinsed the walls using a garden hose and then carried the extra water left in the bottom up the ladder using buckets. The garden hose was connected to a water spigot that was attached to the water line running from the water ram next to the dam. We always knew when the ram was having problems as the flow from the water spigot became very slow. It was normally due to either low water conditions on the creek or something needed to be fixed on the ram. Cleaning the inside of the large cistern took me a full day of scrubbing. It was never hot inside the cistern so it was fun working in the cool conditions.

Our house thankfully had a water well. Only once did we have a problem with our well and I was elected to dig down to the well pump. The pump was around fifteen feet under the surface near the road at the front of the house. It took me many days to dig out the hole to get to the pump. I cannot remember who fixed the pump but I can definitely remember the hard labor digging through red clay to get to the pump. The only other water problems I remember having in our house was in the basement. When our house was built they did not seal the basement correctly and when a hard rain came the water seeped through the walls. We had a sump pump in the basement which was supposed to be used for a drain for the washer, but in a heavy rain the basement filled with water and then the sump pump ran overtime trying to empty the basement of water. We finished only one side of the basement and later on got a pool table. I still recall the difficulty the delivery people had in getting the pool table in the basement through the basement back door as it was a heavy-duty slate table. We used the cast iron stove to provide warmth in the winter otherwise it was too cold to play pool or to watch the small black and white TV.

We also had a brick fireplace in the living room upstairs. To fuel both the stove in the basement and the fireplace, we cut and split the wood during the summer months. Even on our small farm we always had some dead limbs or trees that needed trimming, so I took the chainsaw and cut the wood into small manageable pieces that fit in the fireplace. I moved them next to our house and then took a sledge hammer with metal wedges and split the wood into smaller pieces. I took some of the smallest pieces downstairs and stacked them next to the pot bellied stove. We had a canvas tarp that covered the wood pile to make sure the wood was dry when we needed it. We had several weeping willow trees on our property, two of which were ancient. One of them was in our adopted grandparent's backyard and was around five feet in diameter. The bad thing about willow trees was the soft wood, the good thing was that it made starting a fire much easier. My favorite wood on the farm was hedge apple or Osage orange trees. The wood was a beautiful dark orange color when it dried and it was bright yellow when freshly cut. This was the primary wood we burned in our fireplace. The reason I liked this particular tree was not the long sharp

thorns on the branches but the hedge apples. They provided endless entertainment. The trees grew next to the mill race and on Whiskey Creek so the hedge apples fell in the water and floated on the surface. The water did not flow quickly on the creek so I picked up other hedge apples on the ground and threw them at the ones in the creek. There was little water flow on the mill race so it was much easier to hit them as they floated in the water. They were more than enough for target practice and for imaginary military battles where the floating hedge apples were always the enemy trying to get away from me. One of the willow trees on our farm had partially fallen over and with every big storm more branches bent over. I used this termite infested tree as my base fort. It was a great climbing tree since so many branches were touching the ground. We built a bridge from old telephone poles next to that tree so I could cross the mill race easily. Without the bridge I had to walk down to either end of the mill race to get to the other side, which was clearly not convenient for quick battles.

## **Working for money**

My primary method of making money was mowing lawns. I got paid one cent for each dandelion I pulled out of the lawn, but that never provided much money as I often either lost track of how many I dug up or got tired of messing with them. It was much more fun mowing them. I mowed our lawn and my adopted grandparent's lawn, which together was around an acre and took me over four hours to do both. Eventually my adopted grandfather brought a riding lawn mower which greatly reduced the time to mow the lawns. One of the babysitters we had for many years was another adopted grandmother who paid me to mow her lawn as well. She lived on the other side of Churchville so I rode my bike to her house and used her tiny old lawn mower. We had part of the Churchville cemetery to mow as part of the Ruritans, but that was not much fun as it was an exercise in trimming around the tombstones instead of real open field mowing. This was before the age of weed eaters so the trimming was done by hand shears, which built up serious hand muscles. Later on I took on the challenge of a life time as one of the old cemeteries in the middle of Churchville was extremely overgrown. I was paid to clear it and make

it look presentable. It took me several weekends of hard manual labor just to clear the sticks and branches to the point where I could mow. Mowing was also a challenge since the grass was over a couple of feet high. I mowed and re-mowed and then raked the extra grass out of the way. After a month the whole cemetery look very neat and well kept when I was done. It was the first time in many years anyone had seen the tombstones. I don't recall how much I got paid, but it was worth the effort knowing that I had done it all by myself. Mowing was the source of money for many years to come and helped me pay for a car and put myself through college.

## **Roaming around**

I liked to explore the land all around us. We knew everyone in the village so no one ever objected to me wandering around on their land. The Churchville cemetery was around a mile from our house and was quite a hard bike ride up a steep gradual hill the whole way, but it sure was fun going back down the hill towards home. Sometimes I explored the land between our house and that cemetery without using the road. There were several old abandoned houses on the hills around our house. I was not as interested in them as I was of the adventure in getting to them. One of the hills close to our house had an ancient apple tree on it. Some people in the village said it was an original apple tree from Revolutionary times. All I knew was that they were the best apples I ever ate. At the end of the village from our house was the oldest remaining house in Churchville and it was supposedly dated back to that 1800s. A couple of miles away near the mountains was the oldest house in Augusta County and it was supposedly built around the 1770s. I had no interest in going in these houses as the floors were really unstable, but I liked looking around the outside of them and climbing trees around those houses. My favorite thing was crossing the hill from our side of the town to the other. There were a couple of abandoned old houses to explore along the way that occupied hours within a single day. I felt like such an explorer each time I did crossed that small hill.

## 4. Sports

Most of my early life revolved around sports. It is hard for me to say whether it was forced upon me or whether it was done for fun, I think it was a mixture of both. I had two full size sport posters on my bedroom wall opposite my bunk bed, one of Roman Gabriel (quarterback for the Los Angeles NFL Rams) and the other of Wilt Chamberlain (dunking the basketball as a Los Angeles NBA Laker).

### **Basketball**

My favorite Christmas of all time was when I turned seven years old as it set the direction of my life for many years to come. Some of the things I received for Christmas lasted for a couple of months, but few of them lasted for years. I had a tinker toy set that I used for around a year. I liked to build all kinds of stuff with that set of wooden sticks and blocks. My first structure was a five foot tower which I built from the included instructions. Most days I just made up things to build. Another Christmas I received a set of Lego blocks which provided years of construction entertainment. I built models and preserved them on my shelf where they sat for months without anyone touching them. Then came the electronic building sets where I built things with motors that moved. Since they required continuous streams of new batteries, I lost interest in them after a couple of months. Then there was that one special Christmas that was different from them all.

I cannot remember what started the idea that I needed a basketball goal, but on my seventh Christmas I found a bright orange basketball rim with accompanied net under the Christmas tree when I woke up on that cold morning. My room was the closest to the living room so I was always up out of bed before my sister and was the first to visit the tree. The problem that year was that to use the basketball rim, it had to be mounted on something outside the house. My father had a piece of plywood ready to be mounted above the car garage door. One of the other presents I received was a basketball so I was all set to start my new found career at the ripe old age of seven.

From that point on, my dreams kept escalating on what I wanted to achieve in basketball. I had visions of being an NBA player one day, so that drove my endless hours of practice on our driveway. For hours I dribbled the ball all around the edge of our driveway which was about the length of half a full basketball court. I shot free throw after free throw. I did layup after layup. I had a routine that was surely going to make me a great basketball player. The only problem initially was that I did not have a brother to play with me. My father played with me a couple of times in my whole life. That meant I had to find someone to play with me. I went outside in the driveway daily after arriving home from school and doing my chores. If I had homework and did not finish until dark then I turned on the lamp next to the driveway and played in the dim light. It did not matter if it was hot or cold, raining or snowing - I was out there every day. If it snowed then I cleared the whole driveway and played after I was done. If it was icy then I threw some small rocks on the ice to prevent me from sliding as I drove to the basket. I was clearly addicted to the sport.

Since basketball is a team sport, I needed to be on a team. The elementary school where I attended had an indoor basketball court. The school allowed people to go into the gym on Friday nights and play pickup together. It was the highlight of my week. There were always enough for a game of five people on a side, and I was always the youngest one there. It was fun to play against all the big boys. I was a very fast runner so I got the ball and ran up the court and passed to one of the big boys who scored for us. It was not a full size basketball court but was a very old gymnasium where my mother attended high school. There was one locker room, which you entered through a door under one of the baskets. The locker room was like a dungeon as it had lockers with no showers or bathrooms or windows; it was just a place to change your clothes. For some unknown reason my father decided I needed to be on a real team and decided to coach a Churchville basketball team. There were teams at other elementary schools nearby within fifteen minutes so we all gathered in our Churchville gym to play each other. I preferred to play with older and bigger kids, so my driveway court was my home court. There were six other older boys who lived in Churchville who came by to play with

me. Sometimes the boys took over the driveway and force me to sit in the grass and watch. When my father found out that they were dominating my court, he came out and told them to go home. The problem was that I wanted to play with them instead of having the court to myself. These were some of the same kids who bullied me around, but I was desperate for teammates and gladly wanted me to join me on my court. My real break came when we got new neighbors across the street, even though I was doubtful at first of their abilities since they were preacher's kids. They were five and seven years older than me, but they played on the high school basketball team and were very good. They came over and shot with me since they did not have a goal at their house. It was a friendship made in heaven for me. Later on when they graduated and moved away, I had to find new best friends to join me.

Soon afterward we got new neighbors in a different house across the road. This boy was in my sister's grade and he was two years older than me. He put up a basketball rim on their tiny shed next to their house and since the shed was small, the rim was only seven feet off the ground. One day when I saw him outside shooting by himself, I went over to meet my new basketball companion. This helped fuel my dreams of playing in the NBA as now we were dunking the basketball constantly. We spent hours in our simulated NBA play. Some days we played against each other and other times we were on the same team and thoroughly beat our imaginary opponents. What endless entertainment we had on our hands. At other times we went to my driveway court so we did not ruin our skills on the shortened rim.

In elementary school they had a seventh grade team, which traveled to other schools to play during the winter months. I was able to make the team and found out that I was not as great as my mind made me out to be. I had to compete against other kids my age coming in from outside the small town of Churchville. There were some unforgettable events that happened that year. A good friend of mine was running down the middle of the court and in avoiding another player he tripped and fell on his arm. He screamed in pain as we ran out to him and when I looked down I saw his forearm was sticking out through his skin as he has a severe compound fracture. The other more

scary event was almost in the same location on the court. One of my team members suddenly fell down on the court and started having an epileptic seizure. The coaches had been warned at the beginning of the season that this might happen and somehow were prepared and knew what to do. One of them ran to his office which was right on the stage next to the basketball court to get a tongue depressor. They used it to hold down his tongue so he did not swallow it and suffocate. Both of these events were quite traumatic to all of us. As I was getting used to playing on my team and improving with every game and practice, I got what I thought was the flu. There was a big game the next week, so I pretended I was not sick and went to school and kept practicing after school in the evenings. On the day of the game I intended to walk to school and found I was not able to get out of bed or even walk across the hall to the bathroom. My mother rushed me to the village doctor about a mile away and he told my mother to immediately take me to the emergency room in Staunton, about seven miles away. I had to have an emergency appendectomy within an hour of arriving. Later the doctor told my mother if I had waited another hour I would have been dead as I nearly died on the operating table. My appendix ruptured before they operated on me and it was full of gangrene. He told my mother that I was very lucky to be alive. I stayed in the hospital for a week and received many cards from my school mates. I had the weirdest dreams of my life while in that children's ward – it must have been the strong drugs used to kill all the evil bacteria. I dreamed I was sitting in a room so tiny that I filled the whole room. I torn up the bed sheets into thin strips and made balls of them and was rolling them around in the room like toys. The only problem was that it reoccurred every time I fell asleep after taking the drugs.

When I entered high school, I tried out for the eighth grade basketball team. Now I was competing with players from five different elementary schools for a single team of twelve players. There were two boys each from a different school who were both 6' 2" and looked so huge to all of us. It was the first time I played with black people or been around them. My adopted grandmother told me proudly once that no black family had ever lived in Churchville. One of these tall giants became a close friend of mine. I invited him to spent the night at our

house and when my grandmother heard about it, she became irate and insisted I not bring a black boy to sleep in our house. When he showed up at the door that night, my sister answered the door and did not see anyone so she closed the door. Again the door bell rang and when she opened the door she finally saw him stand out of the darkness. We still all laugh about this event to this day. I had to bear the bad news that my grandmother would not allow him to stay at our house, but regardless of this tragic event we remained friends. My locker in high school was right between two of the other black players on the team who were starters. We did not get along very well, but it was mostly me feeling sorry for myself since I did not get to play very much. The only game I played in that year was the finals of the eighth grade tournament. I cannot remember if the other players got hurt, were doing badly or fouled out, but regardless it was my first and only chance. I played well enough for my coach to give me the net from one of the goals after we won the game. I still have that net to this day.

After not doing well on the eighth grade team I lost interest in basketball. Another problem was that everyone else was growing taller and I remained short. My mother always told me that if I grew into my feet that I would be tall one day. I thought I was doomed to be a short person with large feet and I quit trying out for the basketball teams. I played occasionally with my neighbors but it was not as fun as it used to be. I quit doing my daily basketball driveway drills and decided basketball from then on was only a hobby to be enjoyed casually.

## **Football**

From an early age I also loved football. The only problem I had with the sport was that it was extremely hard to play by myself. I was a very fast runner and because of my love of the sport I made the ten to thirteen year old team when I was only nine years old. Of course it helped that my father coached the team! I was not really fond of tackling other people but I loved the running part. In my very first game of the first season we traveled to Fishersville to play the best team in the league. I was playing deep to receive the ball on the

opening kickoff, and was a bit scared as I saw the thirteen year old giants on the opposing team lined up on the other side. I caught the ball and ran as fast as I could until I reached the 50 yard line and three of the giants knocked me out of bounds. Immediately I had a problem as I did not feel anything and could not move any of my limbs. The ambulance quickly came out on the field and put me on a solid wood backboard and rushed me to the same hospital where I had my emergency appendectomy several years later. I laid on that hard board for a couple of hours until they discovered from the X-rays that I had no spinal damage. I was out for the season and did not have a desire to play that year again, as if my mother would have let me anyway.

The following year I played quarterback as I had been practicing with the team the previous year without playing in the official games because of my near death experience. I had a fairly good arm and was able to take a hit and still throw the ball. I played on the weekends at the nearby baseball field next to my elementary school as a group of kids around the village got together for pickup games. We mostly played two hand touch but if every one agreed then we played tackle. I was always the youngest on the field and very fast so I played wide receiver and returned kick offs. As I got older and my arm became stronger I took over as quarterback of these Sunday games. One little league season we had a great running back who was unstoppable. At last I was able to experience what winning felt like as previously we seldom scored a touchdown let alone won a game. The next year my tall basketball friend joined our team and he played wide receiver. All I had to do was throw the ball near him and he jumped over every one to make a catch, always making me look very good. At the end of that season for our awards ceremony somehow we got George Allen to come to give out the awards. I was always curious why he came from Washington D.C but I heard one of our coaches knew him somehow. It certainly was not because we were a great team, but it was special for us to have him come since we had done so bad for so many years.

I practiced football in our farm fields by passing and kicking the ball, so I decided to enter the local Punt, Pass, and Kick (PPK) competition. They had a specific time to meet in Staunton at the local high school field. I was nervous to perform in front of people from the

big city. I did really well in the two competitions and won my ten year old division. The next level was in Winchester and just thinking about going that far gave me butterflies in my stomach. I competed and got third place trophy, which was an exciting achievement for me. The top place trophy was gold color, the second place was silver and the third place was bronze. They looked similar to the Oscars, given for the best movies in Hollywood. I kept the two trophies on my shelf in my room in clear view of the door as I was very proud of them.

I always preferred playing football to watching it on TV. During special occasions like Thanksgiving Day or Christmas or New Years, my father and I watched NFL or college games on the TV in our basement. Since he graduated from Nebraska, he always cheered for them on Thanksgiving Day, but I always pulled for the opposing Oklahoma Sooners. I did not really like them, but just did so to create a rivalry with my father. During NFL games it was the same thing. He pulled for Washington Redskins, and I rooted for the Dallas Cowboys. I liked the Los Angeles Rams but they always seemed to loose to the Minnesota Vikings in the playoffs and never made it to the Super Bowl. One year my favorite team was the Baltimore Colts because Johnny Unitas was a great quarterback. One year I liked the Miami Dolphins because they were great and went undefeated the whole season. My team preference depended on who was good that year or whoever was the opposing team to who my father liked.

One of my favorite things to do was play one-on-one football with my friend across the road. We played football in my yard and other times in his yard, but the real fun happened when we played in the middle of the road. Our house was right at a ninety degree turn in the road, which then straightened out for about a mile going out of the village. We saw approaching cars in that direction for a long way away. We heard cars slowing down in the other direction as they approached the sharp turn. There was not much traffic on this main road but we constantly had to keep an eye and ear for traffic. We used the width of the road for the game boundaries and if you stepped on the curb or on the grass you were out. The end zones were from his driveway to my driveway. We played in this "field" many times a week for several years. Even though he was two years older than me,

we were equals because I was faster and he was taller. We had an empty lot next to our house that was the length of a real football field, but we preferred to play in the road. Maybe it was because we weren't supposed to be in the road. The real reason for me was that a field full of cow paddies had the potential for a smelly game especially when tackled into a wet cow pile.

## **Baseball**

While I had fun playing basketball and football, baseball was a totally different story. My father gave up being the basketball and football coach after he started both of the local leagues. Other men came along who loved to coach and took over from my father. I was happy about this as the older boys could no longer say I had preferential treatment because my father was the coach. Baseball was the sport that my father loved the most and had once played in a very good league in Kansas City while he worked for IBM. He played third base and wanted me to do the same. The only problem was that I was not good enough. The only safe place for me to play was on second base as I did not see much action. I tried right field, but I failed to judge fly balls correctly and missed almost everything hit my way. The biggest problem for me was that all of my teammates already played the other sports with me and they knew I was quarterback on the football team and the point guard on basketball. Baseball was clearly not my sport and yet my father coached the team and I was forced to play on it. It was a constant source of conflict for years. Looking back I should not have been playing as I was not very good at catching and I was a horrible hitter, but I played in the games anyway. Everyone saw the problem except my father who was blinded by his love for the game and wanting me to succeed at his favorite sport. There was nothing worse for me than standing at the plate and facing a pitcher who was older, as I had no hope of hitting it and normally struck out. It was a complete change from other sports for me as I just went through the motions.

I kept playing baseball until I was thirteen but with every year came more trouble from my teammates. The baseball diamond had new lights on the field as it was also used for the community church

softball leagues and was well maintained. On weekends I went with my father to rake the dirt infield with a tractor pulling chicken wire mounted on rail road ties. Before each game we went early to put lime on the running boundaries and put the bases in their places. There was a hill a couple of hundred feet high beyond the right field area. At night during games it became a cool place to hang out and some of the kids smoked behind the bushes. The younger kids were taken on snipe hunts to make fun of them. I was totally afraid to set foot on that hill at night. At the foot of the hill was a bathroom for the ballpark. It was all I could do to use that bathroom from fear of older kids attacking me. The older kids on the team dominated everyone on that hill. They threatened to beat me up if I set foot on that hill. Only in later years after these kids had graduated from high school did I dare set foot on that hill. Except for the case when I either walked to school in the mornings or on my way home in the evening in the daylight. On such walks, I looked in the special hiding places where there were tons of cigarette butts and wondered what it was like at night during the games. Generally the whole baseball experience was horrible for me.

## **Running**

I started a new and different hobby in the seventh grade. My basketball coach that year took up running on the weekends. At the very end of the year when I was about to graduate from elementary school, he suggested I take up running also. He saw I was very fast and he knew I loved basketball but realized I did not have the talent to make it in high school. The very hill that I was afraid of going up during baseball games became the hill I learned to run on. One side of the hill was hard enough to walk up let alone run up. He made a course that went up the gradual slope and then down the steep side. It was a two mile cross country course all around the school. I enjoyed this immediately the first time I tried it. I had so much energy that it was the only sport I ever tried where I was physically exhausted at the end of the training.

When I entered high school running became my sport of choice. I was the first person to get a varsity letter in any sport as a freshman in our high school and I received it for running cross country track.

That was extremely exciting for me until I found out what I had to go through to be inducted into the varsity club. I had to put on girl's makeup and wear a burlap shirt with stockings for one whole day at high school. Even worse I had to wear a stuffed bra with a blouse. At the end of the day after being totally humiliated, I thought I was done and had arrived. It turned out that the torture was just beginning. Because I was so young the existing varsity letter holders had to make a scene out of Rice Krispies all over my body as well as other unmentionable things in the boys locker room. Then the three of us being inducted had to go shower off to the jeers of the cheering varsity members. It was not a happy memory. Once it was completed, I was awarded my varsity leather jacket upon which I placed my yellow "B" letter with a winged foot medal.

That year I learned about self-discipline for the first time. Other sports came naturally for me, but in running it was all about training. We typically ran eight to ten miles every day. We ran sprints around the track and then the coach sent us off on a long road run. Some days we ran from Buffalo Gap to Churchville and back which was ten miles. Other times we ran in other directions on paved country roads. Some of the runners goofed around and did not really run much at all. They ran a mile or two and then waited for the others to come back and joined then in running back to the school. The coach never really checked on us so if you wanted to do good, then it was really up to each individual. Every one ran in the cross country meets but to letter you had to place in the top ten in each meet. We traveled all over the state as we ran against more than just the local five Augusta County high schools. The primary reason we were so competitive was that one of the football players ran on our team. Cross country was during the very same time as football season, so this exceptional athlete never practiced with us but ran in all the meets. I only saw him lose a couple of races and in those races he came in a very close second place. He always won the state mile and two mile runs in track season and normally got in the top five in cross country in the state without ever practicing. It was an amazing sight to see him run so effortlessly. I had to work for every race just to barely make the top ten and never came close to winning any race. This fellow was also good at football and

basketball and at anything he tried. I on the other hand had to work for the little glory I received.

During the summer months I ran for many miles on country roads by myself. I had several dirt roads in all directions from our house where I ran. Sometimes I met a friend and we ran in the mountains together. It seemed like a perfect sport for me since I liked being outside in the mountains and the more I exercised the better I felt. It was always fun playing in front of a crowd for a basketball or football game, but the teams I was on seldom won so I definitely did not do it for the glory. Running made me physically feel better and I learned how to enjoy being by myself.

## **Golf**

In the latter years in high school I picked up golf as a sport. My father left an old set of golf clubs that I used. They had been in the corner of the garage for many years and had never been touched. I cleaned them off and decided to try them. My mother gave me a golf book by Jack Nicklaus and another one by Arnold Palmer. I read them and then signed up for lessons at the Staunton Country Club to see if golf was something I enjoyed. There were some very serious teenagers in those lessons, but I just wanted to have fun as I had spent too many years of my life being competitive around others. I joined the golf team in high school and we had weekly visits to the golf course in Staunton which was next to the community park. A couple of friends were like me and just wanted to have fun. We played our eighteen holes of golf in the afternoon and talked about everything imaginable as we walked the course. I played a couple of times for the school at different courses around the area, but I never shot a good round of golf. The nicest round of golf ever was the Cascades near the Homestead in the middle of the mountains of Virginia. This location was the place where past US Presidents went for vacation, but since had become a remote tourist spot. It was just fun walking in the mountains playing golf on a very difficult course and having fun since it was impossible for me to have a good score. Besides running it was the one sport that I choose to do on my own without my father's influence.

## **5. Beyond the Village**

We seldom left the Shenandoah Valley, so maybe that was why the times that we did so were memorable. We went on two extended family vacations trips out of the valley and one of those did not turn out very well. Our daily Sunday scenic mountain drives on the other hand found us exploring all of Augusta County.

### **Elliot's Knob**

I loved wondering around the woods near our house and in the Allegheny Mountains during our weekend jaunts. Within a five mile drive west of my hometown, the highest peak in Augusta County was called Elliot's Knob. I climbed Elliot's Knob many times and a ranger fire tower at the very top was the prize waiting to be conquered each time. Since I did not have access to a four wheel jeep or truck, it was full day long walk to the top and back. As a family, we took lunch snacks along with water canteens and slowly walked the curvy dirt forest road inspecting trees and plants along the way. The roads were supposed to be used by forest rangers to get to forest fires on the mountain or to locate them from the ranger tower. It was unpaved and often got washed out in rain storms since the road was steep and a natural conduit for rain in the National Forest. On the way up, there were two sections of the road that were impossible to pass without a four wheel vehicle. They were both very steep inclines and often had deep ruts from being washed out by the latest rainfall. Every time we went, we drove to the first section which was around one-third of the way up, parked our car and walked the rest of the way. During my teenage years, the forest rangers completely blocked the entrance road so that everyone had to walk to whole way to the top, which was around two miles one way. In the spring there were wild blueberries all along the forest road, which made the walk to the top all the more fun. A couple of times I camped at the top with friends as we liked the remote camping in what seemed like being on the top of the world. About one hundred feet from the top was a spring fed pond which was a perfect location for camping. We were refreshed by the cold spring

water flowing out of the pipe next to the pond. It was flat enough around the pond to set up our tents but at that elevation the trees were very small and most of them were poison sumac trees. My favorite time to go up to Elliot's Knob was in the fall when the trees changed colors, one of which was the sumac trees which turned dark red.

The forest ranger station at the peak was open to the public and had three flights of metal stairs. After walking up the steps, we were above the tree line and walked all around the edge of the balcony and saw mountains and trees in all directions. In all the times I visited Elliot's Knob only once did I see a forest ranger present inside the small station. It was always windy on the range station which caused the fire tower to sway with the wind. Besides the fact that I was scared of heights, the moving tower and the metal stairs with quarter sized holes in them did not help either. The whole tower was made of metal with a wire mesh covering both sides of the stairs. I never had any desire to get close to either side but hung on tight to the rail each time I climbed those stairs. At the very top of the tower was a small enclosed room with dark smoky glass windows on all four sides. There was a small walk way all around the outside. We saw a drafting table with maps on it through the windows and a small cot with an old dark green wool Army blanket. I often wondered what it would be like to be a forest ranger and be able to go inside and live for a couple of days. On a clear day we saw the Blue Ridge Mountains which were around 30 miles away as well as the medium size towns of Staunton and Waynesboro in the middle of the Shenandoah Valley. It was my favorite place to be.

## **Hunters & Guns**

When hunting season opened every November, it was the one time of the year that was unsafe to escape into the woods. Two weeks of turkey season were followed by three weeks of deer season. Every year in the local newspaper were stories of at least one or two people who got killed from errant bullets. It was prudent to wear bright orange vests to be visible to hunters, but that never prevented the accidental deaths each year. In the twenty years I lived in Virginia

I only went deer hunting once and that was on private land. There were many reasons why I did not participate in this local tradition.

At the top of that list was the fact that my father got shot in the head with buck shot from a shot gun. I was too young to remember when it happened but the story came up in the family conversations every hunting season when my dad retold the story and how he still had many small pellets in his skull that were never removed. We had Brittany Spaniel dogs to help my father hunt turkey, pheasant, grouse and quail each fall. I recall eating wild game he brought home and occasionally during the meal we bit down on one of the shotgun pellets that we missed in cleaning the game. We had several guns in the house and sometimes I took them out on the farm and had target practice at my favorite dead trees. We had a 22-caliber rifle, 30-07 and 20-gauge shot gun. I fired the 30-07 only once and the force hurt my shoulder so I had no interest in using it again. The shot gun never seemed to hit any specific target, so my favorite was the 22. One Christmas for a family present we got a big box of yellow and black clay pigeons, which were round clay disks made for skeet shooting. I loaded them up in the manual skeet launcher and threw them while my parents tried to shoot them in the air with the shot gun. Guns for me were fun to mess around with occasionally but I never got the thrill from hunting animals.

Another reason I did not favor hunting was that there was a steady stream of cars going through our small town heading for the National Forest at the beginning of each deer season. The traffic was so bad that it made it impossible to cross the road on the day before hunting season opened. A constant flow of mostly trucks with people from the Washington D.C. Area came to the perfect place to bag their quota of two deer per season. The problem was not where the people came from, but often these inexperienced hunters had a singular purpose to get their allotted deer at all costs. They shot at the first thing that moved, which sometimes was another hunter. The worst part of it all was that every local cabin was rented out with 4-8 men and the alcohol flowed freely as the man-vacation season began. This terrible mixture of drunk, gun holding weekend hunters was deadly and I had no desire to be a part of it. The National Forest was opened for hunting

and private land was strictly off limits, but the spirit of getting a deer at all costs meant these limits were ignored. It just was not safe to be around these people who were like foreigners invading our virgin forests.

Lastly, I just did not like killing things. There were exceptions of course. We had a cherry tree in our garden and the birds sat and ate all of my cherries, so of course I had to take care of that situation. I loved cherry pie which my mother made but if the birds were allowed to eat all the cherries then I had no pie. I stood under the tree for hours it seemed and shot any bird that landed on the tree with my air pellet gun. I never intentionally shot Cardinals or Robins but every other bird was a free target. Mostly they were Mockingbirds and Blackbirds. The best thing was that our cat enjoyed playing with them after I shot them out of the tree so each bird was not wasted. A couple of times I tried to shoot squirrels out of their nests around the farm. It was easy to locate their nests near the top of the trees as it was just a big clump of leaves; however, seeing squirrels jumping around does not mean they are easy to kill. After failing miserably I decided squirrel hunting was not for me.

A friend of mine bought a 44 magnum pistol shortly after the Clint Eastwood movie “Dirty Harry” came out. I had never shot a pistol so I went over to his house to see what he was so excited about. He gave me a lesson on how to fire his deadly weapon as he told me it was very easy to hurt myself when the gun recoiled after firing. I watched him shoot several times so I learned the technique of letting the gun flow freely to the side instead of coming back straight and banging me right on the forehead. I was scared to try it at first because of the horror stories he told me, but I finally mustered up my courage and fired at a dead tree. To me, this also did not have any great appeal. I use the word “friend” loosely as the only thing the two of us had in common was the antique cars we drove. I had a black 1949 Plymouth coupe that my adopted grandparents gave me when I turned fourteen. He had a slightly older Dodge similar to mine and kept it in immaculate condition which was clearly the hottest car in Churchville. He constantly listened to “The Doors” musical group. Every time I rode around with him in his fine automobile or visited him at his house, he was playing one of his Doors 8-tracks. I did not know what

the appeal was for him as I found the music fairly irritating, especially since that was all I heard when I was around him.

My only other experience with guns was a unique one. My adopted grandparents had a very old house built in 1850s. They had a dirt cellar that was very hard to walk in as the ceiling was only around five feet high. The further I went back into the cellar the shorter the distance from the floor to the ceiling. In the very back, on the right hand side, was where we stored our potatoes for the winter. We also had a small cabinet in same room where we kept our pickles, grape and tomato juice which we canned ourselves each summer. On the left was a room that was four feet high and had several wooden tables with all kinds of fascinating antiques on them. I spent hours just looking through the things on these tables. One time I got really brave and looked in a very dark narrow gap between this room and the potato storage area. I saw a couple of things partially buried in the dirt on the floor. It turned out that I found buried treasure as one was a Sharp's Carbine buffalo rifle and the other was a very old Revolutionary War style flint lock rifle. The hammer on the Sharp's Carbine was stuck but to my amazement the flint lock hammer cocked and released when I pulled the trigger. I spent many days cleaning these two guns and making them presentable for display in our gun rack in the basement of our home. I often got them out and pretended I was fighting a war as I roamed around the farm.

## **Weekend Drives**

Our normal weekend schedule for ten years was to work in the garden and around the house all day Saturday and then on Sunday become very religious. My mother prepared the food for Sunday lunch before we attended church. When we got home my father complained about everyone in church he had seen that day. It definitely seemed odd to me that we put on our holy clothes and acted differently in church from our normal weekly routine and then when we got home all I heard was bad things about the people we had just seen in church. At least lunch was always ready by the time we changed back into our casual clothes as it was my favorite meal of the week. My mother

always made the best food on Sundays and sometimes used her best plates and silverware. The afternoon was for our weekend drive into the country side. During this time I am convinced we drove on every dirt road in Augusta County. Our drives normally took all afternoon long as it also included the time we got out of the car and hiked around. I had a couple of all time favorite places that I never minded going back to as many times as possible.

One such place was a dirt road that connected Buffalo Gap to Deerfield. The road went right over the mountain, but at the very top was a series of bear caves. Sometimes we stopped and looked in them to see if any wildlife was present as the small caves were right next to the road. A couple of times we saw baby bears on the road walking next to their mother near these caves. There was a clear mountain brook and several forest roads along the route. Sometimes we parked and skipped rocks in the streams or walked up the forest roads. There were no houses on this road at all and it felt like we were hundreds of miles from civilization. After we crossed the top of the mountain and reached Deerfield, there was a large metal covered bridge crossing over a wide river as the dirt road ended. We always stopped after crossing the bridge and enjoyed watching the river flow by and practice our rock skipping skills. On the left side of the bridge was a sign that marked the end of Augusta County. Every time I saw that sign I was amazed that we had ventured so far from home. We always took a right hand turn on the paved road and followed the long route home through the small town of Deerfield on Highway 629. In Deerfield we drove by an abandoned old factory that made me wonder why it closed and what they used to make there. At the intersection of Highways 629 and 250 there was a huge domesticated white turkey farm. A couple of times as we passed by this farm, as far as we saw in all directions were hundreds of dead turkeys. We talked about how stupid turkeys were as they all fell over dead when lighting stuck close by to them. Just another case of how hard farming can be.

Another favorite place of mine was a place called Ramsey's Draft. Besides the fact that it was close to the western border of Augusta County and far from our home, it was a specially designated recreational area. It had a parking area at the entrance and then many

walking trails from that point. With a four wheel vehicle, a dirt road was passable for many miles into the park. For a while we had a Jeep, so that drive was like an adventure for me as we crossed the clear mountain stream five times as the road went right through the stream. We jostled around in our vehicle as we drove over the rocks in the stream. Each crossing was only about one hundred feet long, but it was sheer fun for me each time we drove in the stream bed. Some days the stream was very low and we saw just a trickle of water flowing over the rocks. Other times after a rain the clear water was flowing briskly by and the rocks were barely visible. A couple of times we went there, the water was so high from flooding that crossing was impossible for anyone. At both sides of the stream crossings were small marker posts with the water level marked from zero to five feet. We never attempted to cross if the water level was more than two feet deep. After crossing the stream five times and several miles later, we came to the very end of the dirt road where a hiking trail went into the National Forest. We only made it to the end a couple of times as each subsequent stream crossing was more difficult. By the time we reached the end we did not have much time to hike around as it was time to turn around and head home before it became dark.

One place we seldom visited, but I always enjoyed, was the highest point in northern Virginia right on the West Virginia border called Reddish Knob. Whereas Elliot's Knob was visible from our home and only a ten minute drive to the base of the mountain, Reddish Knob was an hour's drive away. At the time it seemed like going to a foreign county as it was so far away and such a remote location. The Reddish Knob forest ranger fire tower was only a quarter of a mile easy walk from the paved forest road. The scenery was absolutely amazing from the ranger tower as we saw only trees in all directions as far as your eye could see. The ranger tower was only two flights of wooden stairs so was not nearly as scary as the ones at Elliot's Knob. Since the elevation was over 4000 feet, the trees were quite small at the top of the mountain so the view was quite spectacular on the road along the crest near the top. I never knew whether it was so named because of the red clay everywhere or because of the beautiful red trees in the fall. Either way it was a special place to visit.

## Highland County

A couple of times a year we took the long trek over the five mountain peaks from Churchville to Hightown near the West Virginia border. It seemed like forever as I always got car sick going up and down the curvy mountain roads along Highway 250. There was even a hairpin curve about half way on the trip. The first mountain we crossed was Little North Mountain, which is a misnomer as it is more like a bump in the road. There was a small restaurant with an attached gas station right on the hump, which we visited for lunch either going or returning as they made wonderful fresh homemade bread. The next landmarks were the small towns of Lone Fountain, Jennings Gap and West Augusta, which had an old home converted into a high class bed and breakfast called Buckhorn Inn. It was recognizable by the huge oval mirror on the wrap around porch near the front door and mounted deer racks of very large deer on the front wall. The first real mountain was Hankey Mountain followed closely by Shenandoah Mountain. At the bottom of the third mountain was a small river and by taking a small detour to the town of Head Waters, we sometimes visited the fish farm where the Virginia Fish and Game Commission raised Rainbow Trout to stock rivers and ponds for fishing season. After crossing the Cowpasture River and driving over Maple Knob, we came to the first town of any reasonable size, which was McDowell. A relative of our adopted grandparents lived there and we often stopped by to see her. She was very old and lived alone in a very old dimly light house right on the highway, so we felt guilty when we did not see her. There was never much to say to her but she was curious about what we children had been doing and wanted to know about life in Churchville. I remember McDowell mostly because it was the final stretch of flat land before the constant twisting roads began again and was a sign for my impending car sickness. At the top of the fourth mountain, called Bear Mountain, was a place to pull over and park. We always got out to explore the Civil War embankments built by Stonewall Jackson to fend off the northerners. I liked to walk the trail and think of what it must have been like to fight during the Civil War. Right after leaving this area on top of the mountain, the view over the other side of the mountain was fabulous as you could see the next town of Monterey.

This was the location of the yearly Rainbow Trout Festival which was held in the local elementary school. We attended this each year as we all enjoyed the fresh fried fish. The town was more well known for it's yearly Maple Sugar Festival. I looked forward to this jam packed event each year as I loved maple sugar donuts. At the same time they had a mountain craft festival for the local people to sell their crafts. People all over that part of Virginia came for the maple sugar and the crafts. The smell of freshly cooked maple sugar in huge black cauldrons was one of my favorite scents. The final mountain crossing over Monterey Mountain brought us to our destination of Hightown. It would be a stretch to call this a town as it was really just a single store at the intersection of two small country roads. My adopted grandmother's brother owned all the land as far as you could see around Hightown. He was a sheep farmer and supplied us with lambs every year for us to raise. Some summers I went to help him bale hay from his endless fields, which took weeks to complete. It was always fun to stay at their house as it was so far away from any kind of civilization. I liked to roam around the barns and the farm equipment as it was not like anything that we had in Churchville. The house seemed so old and ancient to me but was just a typical country farm house.

## **Swimming**

When I was around ten years old we put an above ground swimming pool in our back yard. I sometimes wondered how we afforded such a luxury since none of my friends had a pool. I think it all started when we attended a party for my father's boss in Waynesboro, who happened to have a brand new in-ground pool. It was the finest pool I had ever seen. Somehow one day my father decided we also needed a pool. We drove to Harrisonburg, about thirty minutes away, to buy a metal pool on sale for around \$400 as a store called Hechts department store. I was impressed just by the amount we paid for the pool! Once we had the pool at home, we started the preliminary work of getting the ground level for the pool floor. Since the soil was red clay this was not the easiest task. It took weeks of manual labor as I was the primary worker on the job site while my father was the overseer. One of the things I remember about my father was that he was good at starting

stuff but never seemed to finish the tasks he started. One of the ways this affected me was that I became a perfectionist. I was not willing to be like my father and I had to do everything until it was perfect in my eyes. The bottom of the pool was a perfect illustration. By today's standards the hole we dug was not level at all, we used picks and shovels to manually flatten our back yard near the house. To protect the pool vinyl liner we put tar paper on top of the clay soil after we got it level enough for my father's liking. I understood he wanted to quickly complete the job instead of making it perfect like I preferred. After completing the pool, I felt bumps on the bottom of the pool and wondered why we did not spend more time to finish the job the right way. We put twenty metal poles that came with the pool kit on the ground, but it was a challenge to get the poles to stand up since they were all anchored together by a metal strip at the bottom. Since our ground work was not completely level, it only made matters worse. Finally after many weeks we had the liner connected to the poles and the metal rail all around the edge complete. The pool filter pump was placed next to the house under a make shift wooden deck. We had a small double sided ladder attached to the side of the pool. The ladder did not work very well as the pool edge closest to the house was about a foot under ground as we had to dig that much out of the ground to make it level. We made a five foot by four foot deck and had a simple three prong ladder on the inside to help us get back onto the deck. In all the pool project was fairly successful. The really big test came when our cousins from Oklahoma arrived for a visit soon after we were done. They won many medals for swimming at the state level and spent many hours in the pool every day. I was sure our small four foot deep and twenty-five foot wide pool seemed small to them, but they were very gracious about it and we all had fun just splashing around in the pool together. I often thought it was a a sign of prestige for my father to have the first pool in Churchville. Some years later a good friend of mine built an in-ground pool, but their house was a couple of miles outside the Churchville town limits, so maybe that did not count.

Even though we had a pool, we still went other places to swim. My favorite picnic place was called Todd Lake Recreation Area. It

was a thirty minute drive through Stover's Shop, Parnassus, and Moscow before turning to go to Chimney Rocks. Sometimes we stopped to see the unusual rock outcrops that looked like three separate old rock chimneys. This park was also the location of the yearly jousting festival we attended. I have no idea where the people came from who participated in this event, but to me they seemed like from a far away land. Of course the event itself was based on the European Middle Age festivals, and they tried to retain some of that flair. All the horses and riders were decorated like medieval knights with bright red, yellow, green, black and white color costumes. The goal of the contest was to take a long javelin with a metal tip on the end and then ride full gallop past four poles and hook the rings hanging from small wires onto your javelin. It was about 100 yards from the start to the finish for the straight course. It was a great thing when a steady handed rider had all four red rings on his javelin at the end. Besides the main event, they always had antique farm machinery on hand and fried food to eat. It was always fun for me but seemed so out of place in the middle of the Allegheny Mountains. They also had a huge public swimming pool at the entrance to Chimney Rocks with three diving boards which provided endless entertainment.

Once past Chimney Rocks, we followed the North River up into the mountains until we reached Todd Lake at the very end of the road. It was not a natural lake as there was a huge earthen dam built on the tiny stream to make the recreational area in the middle of the George Washington National Forest. There were many camp sites around the lake for tent camping as well as for fifth wheel campers. The water was always cold since it was fed by a mountain stream, but it was worth braving the cold to swim out to the platform fifty feet from the shore so I could dive into the cold dark green-black waters. On the platform we always saw fish swimming around the edge, which made it all the more fun. They brought in sand to make a beach area on the edge of the lake and there were many picnic tables in the grass. We went for day trips and took picnic lunches so we swam until it got dark and then headed back home. Since I was in the Boy Scouts, this as our favorite place to go overnight camping. There was a trail all around the lake that crossed on top of the dam that was required hiking every time

I went to Todd Lake. In later years, my best friend and I were able to swim all the way across the lake to get exercise, although signs clearly stated never to swim past the platform.

Although not a yearly event, another favorite swimming hole for me was at a place called Goshen Pass. It was an hour's drive to the West on Highway 42, through Buffalo Gap, Augusta Springs and Craigsville. The beautiful drive was through the heart of the Allegheny Mountains. The big landmark in Goshen was Lake Merriweather where they built a huge Boy Scout camp for the northern Virginia scouts. I never set foot in this camp as it was not for the "locals", but it was noticeable as we drove all around it to get to the swimming places. Goshen Pass was the area along the Maury River as it winds through the gap in the mountains. There were places to pull off and park all along the road where we then walked down to the river to swim. There were huge boulders in the river to climb on and around these large rocks typically there are deep pools of water. The rocks in the river bed were slippery so we had to be careful going out onto the large rocks in the middle of the river. Those big rocks were fun as they were large enough to hold several people at once. None of the many stopping places along the road had pools deep enough to dive into, and the river changed its path through the gap each year. We always stopped at several pullover spots looking for the best place to picnic and to swim. Some days were more crowded than others, but we never had a problem parking or finding a place to temporarily call our own. Since the distance was further than our typical Sunday afternoon drive, we did not go to Goshen often, but every time we went I had a great time.

My favorite place for swimming was at the YMCA indoor pool in downtown Staunton. As part of the Boy Scouts, we went to the YMCA every Friday night and had the pool all to ourselves. It had a deep end with a diving board that provided endless hours of entertainment. It was the place where I learned how to swim. The YMCA gave all scouts swimming lessons. One friend of mine had a really bad experience from one such lesson, where the instructor was a bit too forceful. He felt like she was trying to drown him and he never enjoyed swimming after that day. For the rest of us the hour we had each Friday night was way too short and we always looked forward to

the next week's swim. We did this during the winter months and going outside after the warm water swim was always interesting as our hair partially froze each time. While waiting to leave the building we watched the older teenagers playing basketball in the gymnasium, which was on the level right above the pool. Sometimes while in the pool we heard them running and jumping above us and occasionally a horn went off if they were having official games. A couple of times we went up in the balcony and watched the games as the gym was so small there were no chairs or bleachers on the floor level. There was a small black rail all along the balcony that we leaned over and felt like we were right on top of the players. I thought it would be so much fun to play in that small gym one day with the real scoreboard and wooden floor, but I never did as they torn it down and built a new YMCA outside the town.

## **Vacations**

I don't remember many vacations we took as a family, but the ones I do recall involved Civil War battlefields. My father was on a mission to visit as many of the big battlefields on the East coast as possible, so we visited a different one each summer. After a while they all looked the same to me as they were just a big empty field with a visitor's center. Up the valley about an hour from our home was the location where the battle of New Market was fought. Yearly they had a live reenactment of the original battle using students from Virginia Military Academy (VMI). That was important since the original battle was fought using mostly VMI students. One time we visited Lexington, where VMI is located, as they had a life size memorial statue of General Lee at Washington & Lee College. There was also a life size statue of Stonewall Jackson at his grave site. On one trip we went to Manassas Park battlefield in northern Virginia but it was just a big large field with nothing on it. The place I remember the most was the Appomattox court house where the Civil War officially ended. The house where General Lee surrendered to the northerners was so tiny for such an important event. There were places very far away we visited like the Yorktown visitor's center with it's many visual displays but there was no battlefield to view. Also while in Yorktown we

visited Williamsburg and Jamestown. While walking around Williamsburg we went in one of the houses and watched the blacksmith forge metal and went into the bakery and got free gingerbread cookies. This is where I got a black triangular colonial hat which I wore in simulated battles around our small farm with invisible foreigners. In Jamestown seeing the tiny boats the pilgrims traveled in to cross the Atlantic was amazing. The only battlefield I remember seeing outside of Virginia was the visitor's center at Gettysburg which was memorable as it had a full scale model of the battle with small Confederate and northern soldiers placed strategically on the hills ready for the fight. We did visit Harper's Ferry to see where the infamous abolitionist John Brown died. The scenery was beautiful as it is at the intersection of Virginia, West Virginia and Maryland, with the town nestled right in a valley. The gruesome posters of the hangings of John Brown and his men was hard to forget! We once ventured to Kentucky to see the home of Daniel Boone. This is where I got my coonskin cap which also helped me fight fictitious battles on our farm against native Indians.

As a whole family we only traveled back to Kansas one time. The big event was my grandfather's retirement from the oil fields after many years of gainful employment. He took me around in his truck for his final day at work as he checked on oil pumps. I knew I was in Oklahoma when I saw the large metal grasshopper looking oil pumps repeatedly bobbing up and down pulling the oil hundreds of feet out of the ground. They lived in Shidler which was as flat as anything I had ever seen. Nightly I heard the coyotes howling in the distance, which was most unusual. Their storm cellar was designed to escape tornados. Their house was so tiny that we hardly had a place to sleep for the night. The only thing I remember from his retirement ceremony was that he got a gold watch and that he gave a public speech which was very unusual for my quiet grandfather. My father's two sisters lived close enough to drive down for the day with their families for the event also. One lived in Garnett, Kansas which was close to Kansas City. The other lived in Bartlesville, Oklahoma as he worked many years at Phillips Petroleum. My grandfather's two brothers also came. One was from Washington State and the other from Minnesota. My

uncle from Washington State had been a cement mason on Hoover Dam and he was the origin for my first name. The brother from Minnesota was the origin of my middle name. It was the first and only time I met them both. We stopped in both Garnett and Bartlesville on the way back home to visit even more relatives. My uncle in Bartlesville raised Brittany Spaniel dogs. He had a new hunting dog waiting for us to take back to Virginia. The hunting dogs we had were never pets but were always kept out in a pen by our shed. Their purpose was to help my father hunt and not to entertain me. My sister named him Stonewall Jackson, or Jackson for short, because of our frequent visits to Civil War battlefields. On the way home we stopped to see the Gateway Arch in St. Louis. It was strange going up to the top in the small toy like metal cars. We looked out over the city from the holes at the top and saw the mighty Mississippi below us. I also recall the absolutely poverty for the endless miles driving through East St. Louis as it was quite shocking.

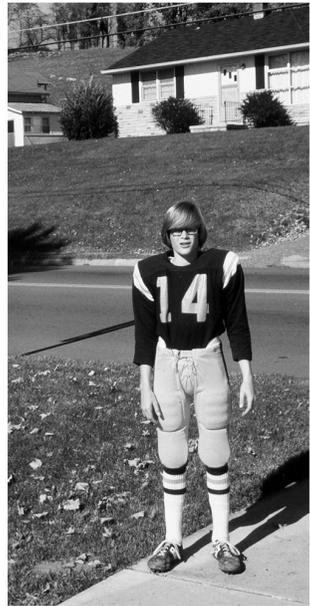
The only trip that ended in a complete disaster was our Disney World adventure. The summer after it opened we decided to go for a long vacation and see Florida. We stopped in Jekyll Island, Georgia at a hotel on the beach. We drove around the island to see the homes of the fabulously rich and famous, which was quite different from the small farm homes in the valley of Virginia we were used to seeing. Some of the people who had vacation homes on this small island were the Pulitzers, Rockefellers, and Vanderbilts. We also stopped in St. Petersburg, Florida to see the old fort in the middle of the city. We stayed in a hotel in Daytona Beach and had a swim in the Atlantic ocean, but marveled at people being able to drive on the beach in their cars. We then crossed the middle part of Florida to see the Gulf of Mexico at Tampa Bay. It was shocking to see absolutely no waves and to be able to walk out into the water for over a hundred yards. We also visited Cypress Gardens and besides seeing the cypress knees all around the lake, we watched the water skiing exhibition as they launched off ramps doing all kinds of stunts. On our way back home we stopped in Orlando, Florida to see the newly built Disney World. As we were getting off the interstate highway on the Disney World exit ramp we accidentally rammed into car in front of us. We were

yards from the most fun we ever had, but it was not to be. The whole area was a big traffic jam and our wreck did not help matters in any way. I still remember the jarring affect as we got hit on both ends of the car. Our car was totaled and we got a lift from the tow truck into Kissimmee. Since we had to pay for a rental car to drive home, we did not have enough money to go to Disney World. I suffered a huge disappointment as I had been planning on the great Disney event during the whole vacation. Thankfully none of us were injured and that was the only vacation that ended this way.



# Section Two

## Teenage Troubles



## **6. Band Practice**

In the fall of 1973 as the Vietnam War was near its end, I entered Buffalo Gap High School. I could no longer walk to school every day, as the high school was five miles from our house. Somehow my sister was gracious enough to let me ride with her every day to school during my eighth grade year. She had a girl friend who stopped at our house on her way to school and I of course was forced to sit in the back seat. In all the years I attended high school I only remember catching the bus a hand full of times. My first year of high school was a transition period in many ways.

### **Small to Big**

There were several small elementary schools that fed into the high school. Churchville elementary was not the smallest nor the largest one. The other elementary schools were North River in Mt. Solon, Craigsville and Deerfield, which was a very small school. One of the schools near Staunton was large enough to have a middle school so those students did not join Buffalo Gap until the ninth grade and it was called Beverly Manor Intermediate. Some of the kids from these schools I already knew from playing sports or meeting at the church softball games. For the most part the eighth grade was a change from a small environment where everything and everyone was familiar to a big school where I daily met new people. I still remember the feeling I had in my first period English class where people from the different schools were in my class. I knew a couple of people from Churchville but it was fun getting to know people from all over Augusta County. The amusing thing is that Mt. Solon was only ten miles from Churchville and Craigsville and Deerfield were really far away at eighteen miles. At the time, it felt like they were from another country, even though on our family Sunday drives we had visited all of these places. There were a couple of girls in my English class from North River that were way too friendly with me, so that was new territory for me also as I had grown up with girls in Churchville from an early age of five but they were just friends.

## Concert Band

I chose to play trumpet in the fifth grade as the high school band teacher visited the local elementary schools once a week to recruit future students. I did not take it very seriously as sports were my real love at the time. I practiced a little every day but it was not fun as I really wanted to be outside. Initially I had a low end trumpet which we rented from the band teacher to see if I liked it before buying my own. To keep my parents from going insane I was given a mute for my trumpet so I could learn in my bedroom without forcing everyone else to hear my bad notes. I also learned how to play the guitar while in elementary school as I took private lessons from a woman who taught in the house where I went to kindergarten. I enjoyed the guitar until I had to give a public recital to demonstrate what I learned. My sister at the same time learned the piano and attended the a recital. She was by far much better than I was. We had a piano in our dining room next to the garage that was very well sealed off from the rest of the house which was where she learned how to play. My sister chose to play flute for the high school band. Looking back we seemed to be quite a musical family during that time.

When I entered high school I decided I wanted to keep playing my trumpet. I choose the concert band elective class as I heard from sister that it was fun. There was a special band class just for eighth graders, to help us learn how to play music together. In elementary school the classes were individually taught, so this was the first time we played together as a band. After the eighth grade we joined the high school concert band which had students from all grades. My best friend from Churchville also played trumpet and we became even closer friends because of it. We had a couple of goals given to us at the start of the class, we had to give a Christmas concert and an end of the school year concert. Half of our time was spent learning how to read music and music theory and the other half was learning how to tune our instruments to the same pitch and to play simple music as a whole band. I thoroughly enjoyed every music class that whole year, so I decided I wanted to continue with band all through high school. I traveled to Richmond to find expensive trumpets at a music store

which was recommended by my high school music director. My best friend bought a Stradivarius trumpet but that was too expensive for me, so I bought the next best silver model. I am not sure it helped but it certainly looked good.

As a concert band we were very good among all the local high school bands. We had a small high school, but we kept up with the larger schools in the regional concert band competitions. We traveled a couple of times a year to high schools many miles away. It was a big deal to travel so far away and I always got nervous. Eventually my best friend and I were the top two trumpet players, so the solos for the special numbers were always up to us. I still ran cross country and indoor and outdoor track, so unlike my friend all of my energy was not put into perfecting my trumpets skills. It was never a source of friction between us as he was a better player and I never wanted more than is being fun. I enjoyed the traveling and the experiences along the way but not the endless practicing trying to achieve perfection.

One summer a few of us so called gifted musicians were selected to attend a concert band camp at Alderson Broaddus College in West Virginia. I was hesitant to go as I was not that serious about playing the trumpet, but on the other hand I wanted to go for the adventure. The college was around three hours away and right in the middle of that state. As a family we had been to Elkins, West Virginia a couple of times but I did not remember why we went there. I had a good time and I realized I did not want to pursue music in college as this was my first glimpse of people who took music very seriously. I also came to understand that I was not very good compared to those people who lived for music.

## **Marching Band**

The next big step came in the ninth grade came when we joined the concert band with all the other high schoolers. In addition, during fall football season we had a marching band. We played for pep rallies in the gym and were on the sidelines during the game to cheer the team on and then put on a great half time show. During the eighth grade I still played on the little league football team and we were quite good

that year but always seemed to have problems winning the big games. Since the high school junior varsity team had a bigger selection of players to draw from in the other surrounding schools, I decided to give up on sports as I was not very good compared to them. It was the first time I realized the preferential treatment I received from my father coach, which was clearly not warranted. Since I enjoyed playing music, I gave up on the traditional sports of football, basketball and baseball. Some of my athlete friends played in these sports and were in the concert band also, but the marching band was only for non-athletes. This turned out to be a huge source of conflict in my life for years to come. As part of the marching band, we also played in the Staunton Christmas parade and regional concert competitions.

For the away football games a smaller group traveled by bus and only played on the sidelines. I always volunteered for this small band as I liked seeing the fields where I used to play little league football when I was younger. We had our own band bus, so I used this opportunity to sit next to the girls I wanted to get to know. This is when I had my first real girlfriend, but as in most things in life, at the time I did not see the forest for the trees. I had no idea how to treat girls and I attribute that to my father as he was not a good role model at all in that regard. It felt good at first to have a girlfriend to walk with around the school and to meet me at my locker. She was like a prize who I bragged about in front of my friends. Then I lost interest in her and started to like her best friend. I sat next to her on the bus to away football games since my girlfriend was not present. It was like having a home girlfriend and an away girlfriend. At the time I saw nothing wrong with it, but now looking back I can see what a low life I was becoming in constantly disregarding other people's feelings. At such a young age, girls wanted to be attached, but I wanted no part of it. I should have said something instead of constantly trying to be someone else around girls. For me, that is why teenage dating is such a bad thing as it leads only to trouble when young hormones are involved.

## **Stonewall Brigade Band**

One of the really interesting results of playing in the high school band was that our band director also conducted the Stonewall Brigade Band in Staunton. My best friend and I were invited to play, so every Monday night we drove to town together and practiced from 7 until 9. During the summer months we played in public weekend concerts in Gypsy Hill Park. The music was mostly traditional music from the Civil War era. The original Civil War band was formed in 1855 and had been in continual existence since that date. During 120 of those years, the concerts were held in this community park. This is one of the only times in my life that I felt like I was truly a part of history. There were less than twenty band members on any given practice night and just a couple of us were high school students. One girl came as often as we did and I immediately got a crush on her. That was a problem with my male teenager hormones as I just could not enjoy the moment, I had to try to make girl friends. Nothing ever came of it since she attended another high school south of Staunton and I had no chance of seeing her outside the Monday band practice. My hormones spoke louder than logic, which was not the first or last time that happened to me.

## **The Mikado**

At the end of one school year, our high school band director told us about an opportunity to play at the outdoor Oak Grove Theater near Staunton. Two of my best friends went with me to audition for the orchestra for one of the summer plays. We were accepted and met at Mary Baldwin College two nights a week to practice the challenging music for Gilbert and Sullivan's "The Mikado". This started while school was still in session since the play began at the end of May and the music had to be perfected way before the first night. For months we practiced with some of the best musicians in the area, most of whom played violins and cellos. It was very different from any music we had ever played. After we had perfected the music, the performers started attending our practice sessions. They had to learn how to sing with us and we had to learn how to play with them as to not drown out

their voices. We had a couple of full dress rehearsals in the college music room before our final practice session at the outdoor theater. We played several shows for about a month and it was great fun and very exciting. The crowds appreciated the professional stage performers who were from the Washington D.C. area. We were mostly hidden from view and provided the live music. I can still to this day remember most of the music and recall the actors from that play. After the final night, they had a huge party for everyone involved at the farm behind the Oak Grove Theater. Since the alcohol flowed freely, we were quickly totally inebriated before midnight. My friend had a bass cello that barely fit in his VW Beetle, but we had to take it back to his loft near downtown Staunton. One of the actors wanted to see my friend's loft as he heard he was also a bass player in a local rock band. Somehow we fit him in the VW along with us and the bass. Once we arrived at his loft we found out that the lights did not work. We dropped off his bass and we were going to leave but this actor fellow decided he wanted to play drums. He was very drunk and was obnoxious as one would expect. The Greyhound Bus station was right around the corner and was his ride back to Washington D.C. It turned out that he had alternative motives for the evening. He had been listening to our typical foul language all during the practices and decided from hearing us talk that we were gay. As he sat on the drum set he was taking his clothes off and trying to get us to come close to him. It was the quickest I have ever become sober. We quickly told him we were leaving and somehow got him out the door and locked it behind him and we quickly fled in the VW. I learned from that lesson that my mouth could get me into deep trouble.

## **Recreational Music**

Because much of my life involved playing music, I started to listen to all kinds of music at home. My father had a special edition collection of Johnny Cash records that I practically wore out listening to them. He also had a collection of Civil War battle songs, which came in handy for the Stonewall Brigade Band practices. He listened to the Ventures as well and that was my first experience listening to an electric guitar, other than an occasional Chet Atkins album. We had a

vintage RCA Stereophonic console record player. It looked like a big piece of wooden furniture and had two large speakers on both sides and the record player was hidden in the middle. It provided the family with endless hours of entertainment. I eventually moved it into my room so I could listen to my own records without bothering anyone else. My first rock and roll album was a collection of the 1970's Vietnam War best hits. My best friend loved the Beatles so I listened to them also. I had no interest in listening to what everyone else did, so my running buddy hooked me up with some very unusual artists. It was all counter cultural music that no one else that I knew had even heard of let alone wanted to listen to. The more rebellious I became the more the music I listened to matched my odd behavior. I started out with Johnny Cash, moved to Neil Diamond, then to Bachman Turner Overdrive and then it got strange as I was a faithful follower of Alice Cooper. For me it was the ultimate in being counter cultural. I remember one Alice Cooper album I bought where the record album came with a disposable pair of pink underwear. I felt so cool to be a part of his fan club, so I went to see him live in concert in Richmond. I then became a huge fan of the Grateful Dead and attended several of their concerts. Attending concerts was a summer ritual for my best friend, his brother and myself. We drove to Washington D.C., Richmond or Roanoke to see just about anyone who played music. We saw Paul McCartney and Wings at the Capital Centre in 1976 and The Who a few years later at the same place. We were excited about seeing The Who as we had heard they smashed all of their equipment at the end of every show which was such a thrill for a teenager. For the last couple of years in high school and early college my all time favorite was Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention. I had every album they made and we finally saw them in concert when he came to Washington D.C., which was the highlight of my life up to that point. That was the biggest collection of weirdos I have ever seen in my whole life and I fit right in with my long Vietnam War trench coat and hand decorated straw cowboy hat. I put a full size poster of him on my bunk bed so I could see him every time I woke up in the morning. He was my idol for many years. I especially liked the fact that he was not allowed on the radio because of his filthy lyrics.

I saw so many live concerts I could not begin to enumerate them all. The first one I attended was an all day event at James Madison College. The big headliners were Three Dog Night and Dr. John. It was really exciting for me not only because it was my first concert, but because it was at a college and I was surrounded by university students. The strangest concert I attended was one held at the Richmond Speedway as my best friend's brother wanted to go. I did not care about any of the bands but any road trip a couple of hours away had to be good. When we showed up, we were the only white people at the whole concert of around 1000 attendees. It felt very uncomfortable and we sat close to the front, so everyone saw us. The headliner for the event was Spanky and Our Gang, so only in looking back was it obvious we did not belong there. We did not get into any trouble but the huge bouncers definitely kept an eye on us as they clearly thought we were there to cause trouble. The most dangerous concert I attended was Aerosmith in Roanoke with my sister. Since we were under a parent enforced midnight curfew we made it somehow without a speeding ticket even though my sister raced different cars home all the way at 100 m.p.h. The worst concert I ever attended was the Riders of the Purple Sage. I have no idea why we went to that one, but we were addicted to going to any concerts. The Paul McCartney concert was the first time I ever smoked pot. One of the Grateful Dead concerts was the first time I drank hard liquor. At that concert we waited outside for three hours in twelve degree windy conditions so we kept warm by drinking alcohol. Oh, the bad old days of self destruction and a wasted life!

In my later high school years when I gave up competitive sports completely, music was central to every thing I did. I had to be listening to music all the time. When I was in my room I had to have music on the record player. I installed a custom stereo with large speakers in my car so I could listen to my music really loud. I never wanted silence. During the weekend as we drove around aimlessly we always listened to music. We visited my running buddy's cousin who had an old farm house down the road from his home. My friend's father beat and abused him so we never wanted to stay in his house. What made his cousin's house so appealing was that he had hundreds of reel-to-reel

concert tapes. He smuggled his tape recorder into the live events to record the concert. He had every Grateful Dead concert ever performed on the East coast. He quit his job when they were on tour and traveled to every concert. We liked listening to each one as he told us stories about each one. He also had many of the East coast Jimi Hendrix concerts which also fascinated us for hours as we had no way to see him in concert since he was dead. One of the worst things I ever saw happened in that old farm house. He had a big pot bellied stove in the middle of the kitchen with a table and chairs nearby, where we sat and played backgammon for hours at a time. One night my runner friend decided to take LSD that his much older cousin gave him. As he was waiting to play the next game, he sat in the rocking chair next to the stove. He was acting kind of odd and then suddenly jumped up and grabbed the pot bellied stove and tried to pick it up. He had a long sleeve shirt and heavy coat on; otherwise, he would have permanently damaged his arms. As I pulled him away from the stove, he turned to me with super human strength and pushed me away. One of the other drug addicts in the room knew how to handle him and somehow wrestled him to the ground until he relaxed. That was the first time I saw the power of narcotics.

## **The Band**

I knew many of the local musicians and one time a lead guitar player for one of the local bands asked me to play trumpet for them. They wanted to play songs they heard on the radio which had horns in the songs. He gave me some of their records and told me to have the songs ready by the next weekend. I was very good at reading sheet music but had never tried to play while listening to music. At the next week's practice I failed miserably as I had picked most of the right notes but in the wrong key. They put up with me for two straight weekends and then let me go. For me it was another clear case that I was not made to be a professional musician. This was the final time I played trumpet..

## **7. Divorce changes everything**

In the fall of my eighth grade year in high school I turned fourteen. This may not sound like a big deal but it was. The little league sports stopped at age thirteen. There was a Babe Ruth baseball league for boys from thirteen to fifteen and I played on that for a two years, but it was only because my father made me. I saw at the high school junior varsity level that the competition for a position on the traditional sports teams was much greater. At the start of the ninth grade I decided to switch to cross country in the fall which was the alternative sport as compared to football which was also in the fall. That was not the only big change for me in the ninth grade.

### **Changes at school**

One of the pleasant things about running on the cross country team was that there was no junior varsity versus varsity distinction. Every one practiced together and we all ran during the meets. We all ran the grueling track regressions and we all ran the long distance runs together. One of the best runners on the team was also one of the bullies who had bothered me for years in Churchville and had stolen my seventh grade girlfriend. It was odd to be around him every day after school. He was much better than me at running so I did not see him much as he was way ahead of me on the long distance runs. However, by the end of the season I kept up with him and although I never beat him in any matches, I finished in the top ten in almost every meet. I think it shocked him as much as it did me that I did so well. He was not happy when I got a varsity letter, but he accepted the fact and treated me differently, but definitely not as an equal or someone he wanted to be friends with. Running for me became a way to relieve stress and to relax. That sounds odd since it was such a physically painful sport.

The ninth grade was the peak for me in high school and it only went downhill from that point. Up to this grade I was happy and content. I cannot say that the glory of becoming a varsity member went to my head or that I became haughty, as the other athletes in the

school made sure I knew I was not one of them. This was the year I got my first full time girlfriend, who I had to walk around school with and hold her hand as a sign that she was mine. This was also the first time I drank beer. To me now that seems like a very young age to be involved with alcohol or drugs, but at the time I thought it came with the territory of being a high school athlete. One of my friends in Churchville decided we needed to go camping, which was always fun for me. Then I found out that his older friend bought us a case of pony size Miller beer. I remember my first taste of beer as I thought it tasted horrible and did not understand why anyone wanted to drink it. We went on to drink the whole case as my friend drank twelve and I drank twelve. I definitely felt strange but was not drunk in the sense that I passed out or was unable to walk. At midnight we decided to leave our camp site and walk through the village down the middle of the road. We had some strange fascination with the highway as this was the same fellow who used to play football in the road with me. He then came up with the brilliant idea to take gas caps from cars and throw them in a big empty field. I was not brave enough to tell him that was stupid, so I helped him. By the time we got right in the center of Churchville, the local police officer, whom we both knew, was waiting for us. He wanted to smell our hands for gas as someone had seen two boys stealing their gas cap. He smelled the beer on us and of course we denied everything as we had become sober quickly. I have no idea why he did not do something to us, as it may have been he knew my father or did not like the people from whom we took their gas caps. At any rate he told us to go directly back to our tent and if he caught us out on the streets again that night then he would take us to the Staunton correctional center. We went right to our tent and fell asleep. The next morning I had my first hangover and spent much time in the bathroom throwing up as my body was trying to reject the alcohol I had poured into my body. I wish I could say I learned something from this experience, but at fourteen intelligence is not a virtue of teenagers.

By the middle of the ninth grade, I was used to high school and had a new set of friends. There was a group of around twelve of us who were fast friends. We often went camping together as one of their

father's owned a farm right across from the high school. One of my other long time friends had a 350+ acre farm, so we went there also. It was a great time as we hiked around and explored the country side in the evening and camped at night. We always had a camp fire as that was required along with firecrackers. We split up in groups and pretended we were at war with each other. Our favorite thing was to set bobby traps for the others by putting firecrackers in piles of cow dung and blowing it up as they passed by. Sometimes we had rock battles were we got on the opposite sides of a pond and threw rocks at each other. I am not sure how we never hurt each other, but we were boys who wanted to have fun as boys.

I cannot say for sure who was to blame for what followed but I think it was a combination of things. Since I played in the marching band in the tenth grade, we were in the bleachers before halftime during the varsity football games. The football team was the worst among all the local high schools. We seldom won a game and normally got beaten thoroughly. Some of the cheerleaders were right in front of the band section and our mutual goal was to get the crowd excited about a very bad team. When we were not playing, a couple of us decided to start running our mouths about how bad the team was doing. The only problem was that the cheerleaders in front of us dated the stars of the football team and naturally told them of the disgraceful things we had been saying during each game. It was clearly stupidity on our part as we were taking the little dignity they had as an athlete and making them feel even worse. The sad thing is that I knew better as I was an athlete also. I need to back track slightly and talk about one of the primary events that spawned this bad decision.

For my second year in cross country in the tenth grade, I was very confident that I would do even better than the year before. I knew I could finish in the top five in every meet. I started to grow my hair long at the end of the ninth grade and my coach did not like it at all when the new season started. We were required to be present at each practice unless we were sick. It was especially important for those who had lettered, which included me. I was clearly unnecessarily overconfident and decided I did not need to practice. The exact details have long been forgotten, but it was definitely all my fault. My coach

had no alternative but to kick me off the team after a couple of weeks of dealing with my arrogance. I lost my varsity letter and had an official ceremony where I had to strip off the varsity letter from my expensive letter varsity jacket and was told I could not wear this jacket in public while I was in high school. In just a short year I went from glory to a big bust. It was all symptoms of my life at home.

## **Changes at home**

I have to start this part of my life story by saying that I seldom was around my father outside of sports. He had something to do every night of the week outside of our home, which did not include anyone in the family. He switched jobs many times so I was not really sure where he worked at any given point in my life. For a couple of years we seemed to have all kinds of new things around the house. I never cared about possessions, but I wanted my room to be neat and clean with some of my sport trophies and hand built toys models lining my shelves and on my dresser. Life was simple for me and I enjoyed the small farm life immensely. As I entered high school this all changed.

Along with the big changes of going to high school, I also had some other changes going on at home. When I was fourteen my father decided to give me his Playboy magazines after he was done with them. He had a mail order subscription and the pornography magazine came in the mailbox with a brown bag like cover. I normally got the mail as I was the first one home in the afternoon. Around that time, my mother started to work in a local camera shop in Staunton. I must say that it is one thing for curious boys to find stuff accidentally, but a whole different issue for their parent to feed them pornography purposefully. This went on for a couple of months until my mother found one of the Playboy magazines in my room. On investigating the matter further, I confessed that my father had given them to me, which he did not deny. That was the end of an already strained relationship as my mother could not take it any more. Within a couple of days my father had a heated argument with my mother in the kitchen, about which I do not care to repeat anything that was said during that time as

none of it was good. Then he left to live in Richmond. Suddenly my whole life changed.

Up to this time, we always ate food from our garden all year long. We never seemed to lack for money as no one called us poor. That all changed when my father left the house as we now had to survive on only my mother's hourly pay. My sister was entering her rebellious stage in life also, so we were one unhappy family. For the first time in my life I had to start eating tasteless TV dinners. I had to do everything around the house, whereas before I was really helping my father by doing it for him. Now if I did not do the yard work or fix stuff around the house, it did not get done. I had to grow up fast. This all happened during my tenth year in high school and that definitely helps explain why I had trouble in school at the same time.

## **Changes in life**

Divorce is a strange thing. When two people are very unhappy, it just seems natural that they should separate. The big problem comes when children are involved. In looking back I can clearly see the separation of my parents sent me off the deep end. It is not all their fault, but it was just a little bit too much for me to handle as I was already going through huge life changes with my hormones kicking into overdrive.

## 8. Downward Spiral

I have so many stories I could tell about my days of rebellion, but there is no need to tell the same stories repeatedly and bring up bad memories that don't help anyone. I will only share those that most affected me.

### Driving

With the freedom of driving came all kinds of trouble. I started driving at a very early age as my adopted grandfather gave me his black 1949 Plymouth Coupe when I turned fourteen years old. I drove that car around in our fields for practice. It had a stick shift on the steering wheel column, so I had to learn how to use a clutch from the beginning. One time when I was riding with a friend in his car, we got the brilliant idea that I should drive on the real road. His father just gave him a blue and gray 1954 Ford. Weekly we went by his wannabe girlfriend's house by driving on the country road near her house. The road was hilly near her house, so we went to the top of the nearest hill and he turned the car over to me. I had trouble seeing over the steering wheel so I sat on a couple of thick school books. Near the bottom of the hill was a curve and a ten foot embankment on one side. We thought it would be easy to drive down the hill as gravity would make the car go fast without having to change gears. It turned out that as teenagers we forgot to think! As I got to the turn, I was going way to fast and I ran into the bank. We jumped out quickly to bend the fender so we could leave the crime scene quickly and go home without the family of the girl seeing us. As a true friend, when we got home he told his parents that he had wrecked the car as it would have gotten much worse if they had found out I had done it.

This friend lived across the road from us and was my sister's age. He was also the person with whom I first drank beer. His father raced cars at the local race track as a hobby. His mother worked in a nearby clothing factory for her whole life. For fun we went to the Waynesboro dirt race track every Friday night, about thirty minutes drive away. Since his father was a driver, we were allowed to go into the pit area

and watched the races on top of his car which I had disfigured in the accident. With race tracks come much beer, so we were required to drink. I drank more to be rebellious than peer pressure and it was never for the taste.

Over the high school years, I eventually lost all but three of my friends. The rest did not want to associate with us because we were known as the drug users with long hair. We also had very foul mouths and insulted everyone with our nasty language. I was known as the one with the most foul mouth of all. I am not sure why it happened, but I have to think part of it was my parent's getting divorced sent me off the deep end. One of these three friends was a running buddy. The other two were fellow high school band members. Our favorite thing to do after the Friday night football games was to drive around all night long and drink alcohol. We had very particular tastes for beer as we did not drink what every one else did. We drank expensive beer like Heineken and Guinness. We alternated drivers to spread the cost of gas, but never considered the driver should abstain from drinking. We got tired of drinking beer and found the cost was starting to be a bit too much for us, so we decided to raid the alcohol cabinet of my friend's father instead. His parents were very liberal in that they told us it was fine to drink alcohol as long as we only did it in their house. That has to be the most stupid thing any parent could ever tell teenagers. Now we had access to the hard stuff as he had Whiskey, Bourbon, Vodka, Rum, Grain Alcohol and many other kinds of liquor. I tasted all of them, but I found Whiskey and Bourbon had a worse taste than beer. I liked the Rum but the Vodka was too harsh for my tastes. Eventually on a dare, I started drinking Grain Alcohol. The odd thing about this was that my other friends did not drink it. They mixed it with their drinks and passed out on the sofa in the kitchen eating area afterwards. I drank tons of it and it never affected me. It was like a merit badge of honor which I was known for among my friends. One time I drank a whole glass of it straight and drove home after all of my other friends had passed out. I did not feel any affects of the 190 proof (95%) alcohol, but when I got home in the middle of the night and went to the bathroom all I saw was blood pouring out as I went to the

bathroom. I calmly went to sleep as I thought nothing of it. We carried on in this way for over two years.

One final alcohol story still comes to my mind. There was only one girl in high school that drank like we did. She was in our grade but dated a much older guy. One time we drove to her house after a football game as she told us one of her relatives had given her moonshine. We naturally wanted to try something different so we went directly to her house. It was home made corn liquor, and I found the taste very odd but drank it anyway. We heard stories of moonshine killing people, but we were willing to take the chance. After we drank the whole bottle she showed us what had to be done at the end as she drank the worm that was at the bottom to finish it off. We respected her for that, but we thought it best to not hang out with her again as she was out of our league.

## **Drugs**

I consumed mass quantities of alcohol at a young age, but that soon was as stimulating as it used to be. After attending a rock concert and getting a taste of free marijuana, that became our new fad. In the years I smoked, I only bought it a couple of times. My three other friends paid for it and let me smoke it with them. I always bought the alcohol. It did not take us long to need even more so we found hashish. The best thing of all for us was smoking pot, hashish and drinking hard liquor all at the same time. For some odd reason we never got in trouble with the police which is amazing to me since we constantly drove around in our cars drinking and smoking. One of my friends did get caught in his VW and was put in jail overnight on a possession charge. We thought nothing of it except he had earned our respect for getting into trouble. We bought our illegal substances from a bum who lived in the woods across from the community park in Staunton. He lived in a lean-to tent and we always knew where to find him. He had been busted several times for selling and distributing drugs so he hid in the woods most of the time. He looked like a cave man and smelled like one too. He had a huge black beard and very worn dirty clothes. He fit our picture of what someone looked like who did drugs

constantly. Since one of my friends was an excellent bass player, he played with a couple of local bands. Through him we found even more friends in Staunton to hang out with who did drugs and alcohol. One of them worked at a local record store and had a collection of thousands of albums. We went to his basement and he played any music we requested while we smoked pot. Within a couple of years, we needed even more stimulation, so through our Staunton connections, we bought cocaine. We all gathered at the abandoned quarry in Staunton to try the new drug. As the others tried it one by one, I did not like what I saw as they changed right before my eyes. It was a strange feeling to have known these friends for years and to see them transformed into different people. I decided that I wanted no part of it and for the first time in my life I did not trust any of them to drive me home. They were acting crazy.

I knew that I cared less about life the more I drank and smoked pot. All we wanted to do was get high and listen to music. We thought the safest thing to do was to drive around while we got high. It still amazes me that we never crashed and hurt someone else. One of fellow cross country runners had that happen to him. He got drunk one night with his girlfriend and in a long straight stretch of road near the high school, he crossed the road and ran head on into the car in the other lane. It killed the woman and her daughter in the other car. He went to jail on murder charges and we never saw him again. For some reason that did not stop us even though he was a friend of mine and I knew him well. Within a couple of years his brother walked into a bar and shot a fellow who bothered him and so they both ended up in jail. I was saddened by both events.

The other sign that my life was getting out of hand and going down hill fast, was how I treated my mother. I was definitely unhappy with my father for leaving our house. He had even offered for me to move to Richmond to live with him and to attend a private high school nearby that had one of the best basketball coaches in Virginia. I drove down to see him and visited the school. It was really tempting, but I did not want to leave my friends, most of which I had been around my whole life. I choose to stay with my mother and my friends. Looking back I never regretted that decision as I never grew tall

enough for basketball in high school. When I graduated from high school I was only five feet seven inches tall, so basketball was not a part of my future. Over time I became more unhappy with my life and with everyone including my mother. She was the recipient of my wrath when I avoided sharing my frustration to my friends. If she caught me coming home late, she sternly rebuked me. At first I ignored her, but as time passed I eventually let my foul mouth loose at home as well. Every time I spoke with friends at school my sentences were full of curse words, so it was only natural I did the same at home. As my life spiraled downward, I started yelling at my mother when I disagreed with her. The one person on my side became my new enemy. Because my bad language kept getting me into trouble at school, a friend of mine decided we should pick a different way to speak. Somehow he got a copy of the book *Clockwork Orange* and memorized the vocabulary from the book and it became our new code language. Our private foul way of speaking gave us new found power over people. We insulted them constantly and no one knew what we were saying.

## **Life Threatening**

Looking back at my time in high school, it is hard to believe that I survived. Except for a couple of friends, no one liked me. I had the same girlfriend for many years, but she was infatuated with me as she definitely did not like me for what I became. One year I became so angry with her that I found an eighth grade girl to date, just to irritate her. One of my friends kept informing me of the statutory laws of having sex with underage girls could send me to prison, so I was careful never to even kiss her. I kept going out with her to get even with my girlfriend. About the same time I started having a crush on another girl in the concert band. I went to her house many times a week, but she ignored me as she was best friends with my girlfriend. I had serious issues with girls that only got worse with time. If I liked someone then I felt like I had to do something about it whether it made sense or not.

Everything came to a peak when one of the football players decided to date my girlfriend. She must have told him the stories about me in disgust, which looking back I don't blame her at all for doing so.

I take the blame for being a stupid teenage jerk. This event plus the fact that I had already insulted most of the football players during our marching band ravings all came to a head. My alcohol and pot addiction only made me care less what anyone thought. After one football game three of us went into Staunton to eat at Pizza Hut. We liked to go there just to get away from people at our high school and to avoid people we did not like. As our food arrived, a big group of football players from our high school showed up as well and sat at a large table near us. They looked at us repulsively most of the time we were there. When we got up to leave, four of the ones who hated us the most followed us outside. Since I was regarded as the ring leader of everything they hated, they came after me. One of them threw me on the trunk of my friend's car and threatened me saying if he ever caught me alone anywhere that he would kill me. He hit me a couple of times and then they all went back inside the Pizza Hut. Since the football players were very strong and twice my size I was really scared, so we quickly left before they decided to come back out and finish the fight.

After this episode, my life only got worse with each day. My school locker was at one end of the hall in the newer part of the school. I had to go by the football player's lockers which were right across from the gym. One of the boys in my sister's class was the leader of those who hated me. If he was at his locker, then I walked as far on the other side as I was possible. When he saw me, he slammed me up against the lockers and threaten to beat me up. Three of the other people who couldn't stand me had lockers right next to his, so they in turn formed a circle around me, all the while threatening to hurt me.

A couple of times things happened outside of school as well. Since I had a uniquely recognizable car, it was easy to spot me in a crowd. One day as I was leaving school, several football players surrounded my car with their cars and blocked me from driving out of the school parking lot. They again threatened to kill me if they caught me off the high school grounds. After this event, I never went anywhere alone. My best friend starting learning Karate to defend himself as he was scared for his life also. When I was younger I enjoyed watching church softball games on the elementary school fields, but now I played on our church softball team. I was afraid every

time I went to play. I drove my car as I needed a way to go home quickly and I was too afraid to walk home the quarter of a mile in the dark. Once I was caught after a game and threatened again as I reached my car. It was the last softball game I ever played in Churchville.

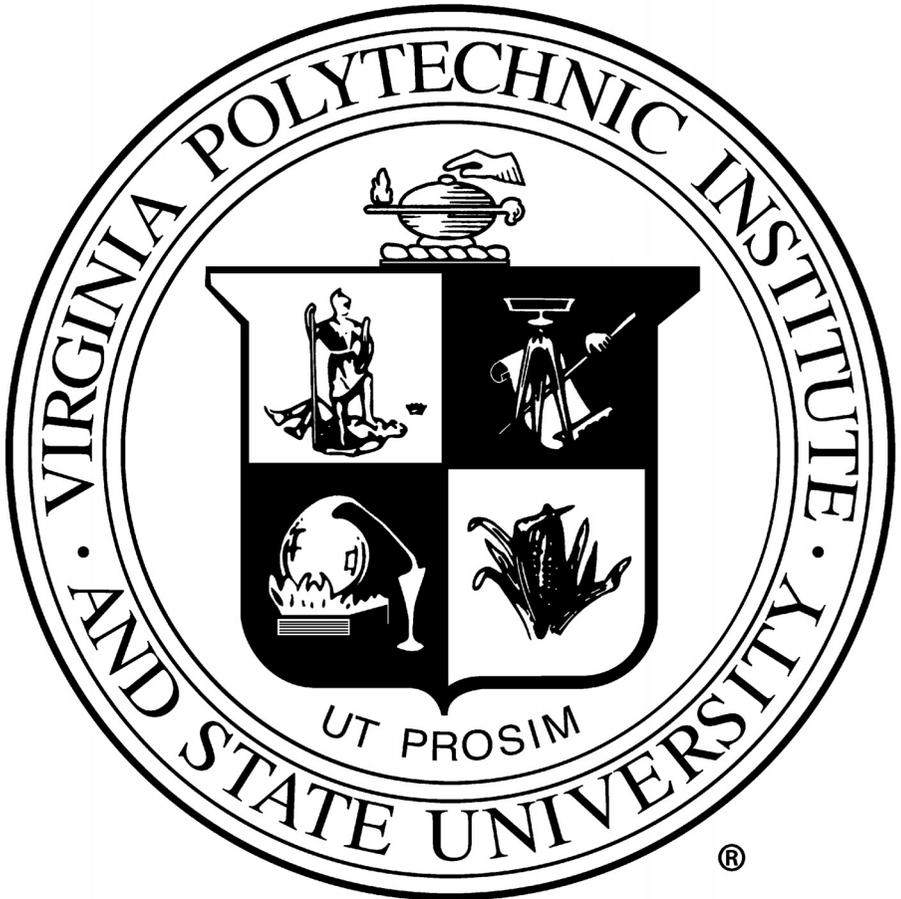
## **Leaving**

Since I was constantly fearful, I decided something had to change. My best friend found a way to leave school early by entering college in skipping his senior year of high school. He was accepted at William & Mary College. Because of this, he was allowed to attend summer school after his junior year of high school. One of the other boys I knew did the same. I approached our high school principal about the problems I faced with the football players threatening my life and requested permission to attend summer school. He told me he would not allow me to attend and that I would never amount to anything ever. I don't blame him as on the surface I am sure it looked that way. The only problem was that I always got the best grades in my high school classes, but it was my attitude that was horrible. He was on a mission to make sure I did not get off easy as I made his life difficult. Since I knew he was retiring at the end of the year, I took a chance and went ahead and attended summer school with my friends. The summer school was held in a high school far from my home town. On the first day of summer school, there were ten students in the class and the teacher called roll and found out I was not on the list of approved students. He said I could stay and finish the classes if I wanted, but I had to get my school principal to sign the certificate for me to graduate from high school. I finished the summer school with a pair of As in twelfth grade English and US Government. I took the college entrance test and enrolled in the local community college. I then took my completed summer school certificate to the new high school principal at the end of the summer to get his signature. He was previously the vice principal and he knew me well since he was my mother's cousin. I think he signed the form as he did not want to deal with me during the new year, but for whatever reason I had the completed form and was ready to attend college and to escape the life threatening bullies.

# Section Three

## Leaving it behind

The Virginia Tech seal is used with the permission of Virginia Tech.



## **9. College with side jobs**

After a couple of years of deeply desiring to leave everything I knew behind, it was a great relief to be away from the headaches of high school. I had a chance at a new start in life, but the biggest problem was I did not know what to do. I needed a little direction and since nothing came to mind immediately, I decided to attend a local community college in hopes of learning what to do with my life.

### **Community college**

I signed up for the general studies curriculum at Blue Ridge Community College in Weyer's Cave, which was twenty miles from my home. To celebrate my high school graduation, I decided I needed to change my image and buy a new car. I was afraid that my 1949 Plymouth could not take the high mileage to and from college every day. There was absolutely no way to afford a brand new car so I started shopping for used cars in Staunton used car lots. I eventually found a bright yellow 1976 model Plymouth Arrow for \$2000. It seemed like way too much money, but with my adopted grandparent's help I was able to pay cash for it. For a while I borrowed their light tan 1962 Ford Falcon when I needed to drive far or got tired of my old vehicle. My adopted grandparent's never complained and always lent it to me. They bought a brand new Robin egg blue 1973 Datsun B-210 so the Ford Falcon was like a second car for them that they seldom used. I really wanted my own car and had saved some money for college and a new car, but it was still a huge decision for me. I did not have the Plymouth Arrow for too long before I got in an accident. I was driving down a divided highway after night class and a VW bus was in the middle turn lane with his left blinker flashing. He was kind of weaving around the road before getting into the turn lane, so I wanted to quickly get around him before he hit me. As I passed him, he veered to the right and hit me and drove my car right into a store parking lot, I barely missed a telephone pole by a couple of inches. I was very unhappy as I had worked hard to pay for the car and now some jerk had messed up my perfect car. When I got out to look at it,

I was even more shocked. The VW had sliced open the whole side of my car like a can opener. When the police got there I told them what happened and the person driving the bus told him a completely different story. Of course I expected the police officer to side me with me since I told the true story! When I got home and told the disappointing news to my mother, she decided it was best to get a lawyer as she anticipated our car insurance to greatly increase. My sister recently totaled her car in the middle of Staunton as she wrapped it around a telephone pole and came out uninjured, but it had already affected the family car insurance rate. We could not afford yet another increase. My mother worked in a camera and frame shop in downtown Staunton and one of their clients was a lawyer. We hired him to reverse the charge that was posted against me for improper driving. As the lawyer dug into the details, it turned out that the person driving the VW was a friend of my sisters and had many episodes with driving while intoxicated, which only helped me. The lawyer proved from the way my car was damaged that the VW was driving way over the speed limit and had been in the wrong lane. The judge dropped the charges which left me to get his insurance to pay to fix my car. We then found out that he did not have insurance, so our insurance had to pick up the cost under the uninsured driver clause. That was the last time I was in a car accident.

For the first year in college I took the required general classes with random electives. I wanted to try as many things as possible in hopes I found something that interested me. By the end of my first year I tried Engineering, Chemistry, Psychology, Art Appreciation, Precalculus and Drafting. I had the top grade in my Chemistry class and it was easy for me, but I had no desire to pursue that for a career. The engineering classes exposed me to computers as they had a teletype style computer on which we wrote small Basic programs. Part of that engineering class had training on how to use a calculator! I did well in the classes I took but most of the subject matter was too boring for me. I liked the Psychology class as it had content that I had never been exposed to before. One of the best classes I had while in community college was my Art Appreciation class. I took art in high school for two years and would have taken it for a third year if I had

not skipped my senior year in high school. It was something I liked my whole life. The high school art teacher went to the same church we attended so I knew her well and really enjoyed her classes. One year I went to a Staunton studio weekly to learn how to paint abstractly, which was a first for me. With that professional artist's help I won the local art competition for my age group. I was fascinated by seeing the history of Art through the ages as the college class required us to memorize hundreds of paintings and identify them by category, age and name. One intriguing idea was attempting to combine everything I liked into a single career. I tried the Drafting class as I thought a career in Architecture was a combination of my love of Art and the technical part of engineering. I found the drafting class too tedious and hard on my eyes, so it seemed as if I was finding things I did not like more than one to become my ideal career.

My eye sight had helped in another way as well. I had thought of joining the Air Force as a way to pay for my college, but when I learned that I had to have 20-20 eyesight to be a pilot, I gave up on the military option. I first learned that I needed glasses when I was in the fifth grade. I was not able to see the blackboard and was promoted to the front row of the class, which for me was a bad thing. When I learned I had to have glasses, I did not want to wear them. I took them to school each day and did not wear them at all during the fifth grade year, but instead squinted to see the board each day. My eyes kept getting worse and by the sixth grade I had to wear them to see any writing on the board at the front of the class room. I did not like wearing glasses for sports as I had to have a band to keep them from getting knocked off my face. At any given time I always had broken glasses and used tape to hold the sides in place. By the time I entered college my glasses were very thick and always annoyed me. I did not want to pick a career that would make my eye sight even worse so I gave up on Architecture.

Since mathematics came so easy for me, I decided to take all of college mathematics classes that the community college offered. It really helped that the math teacher was the best at the college. He was also a runner and formed the local Road Runners club, so a couple of times I participated in runs with him. I got straight A's in all my

mathematic classes and I was on the President's list for each quarter I was in college. I was on a mission to prove to everyone at my high school that I was not the loser that they thought I was. It helped that my best friend left to go to William & Mary and my other friend had gotten married when he graduated from high school. My only other remaining friend was still in high school so I avoided seeing him as I wanted to leave everything about high school behind me. One of my newer friends from Staunton was a musician and became my new best friend. He was very popular with the girls and as we drove around town together, girls stopped us and wanted to talk to him. He also provided entertainment each weekend as he knew all kinds of people around Staunton where parties were being held. I hung around him my whole first year at college. I left all of my high school roots behind me but none of my alcohol and drug habits as I kept them intact unfortunately.

One of the interesting developments during my first year of college was that I grew over six inches that year. When I left high school I was five feet seven inches tall but after completing my first year of college I was six feet one inch. I started playing basketball again since I was tall enough to play competitively again. I joined the Staunton YMCA and played with some of the college guys I met during the weekends. They had a recreational league at the college which I also joined. I quickly remembered the skills I had developed when much younger. I used to be a point guard and was an excellent dribbler from the hours of daily practice. Now I was one of the tallest on the team so I had to play forward and center. It was an odd feeling as I always wanted to dribble the ball up the floor and then pass to someone else. I was very fast so I grabbed the ball and went on the fast break to the basket pretending to be the tall guard. The more I played the more I learned from others how to play my new position.

I still remember the first time I dunked the basketball as we were warming up in the YMCA before playing a game. I tried dunking once in high school when in the eleventh grade. During after school tennis, it rained so we went into the gym to practice. After the tennis team left, some of my old running buddies came in the gym after spring track practice. I told them to watch my new trick, while I took a tennis

ball and ran from the free throw line and dunked the tennis ball. The only problem was that on the way down one of my fingers accidentally got hooked in the basketball net. I lost my balance and crashed onto the floor hitting my left wrist really hard as it caught most of my body weight. By the time I got home, my wrist was swollen to twice the natural size. My mother took me to the emergency room fifteen minutes away in Staunton and I learned that my wrist was broken. My position on the tennis team was lost and my high school career in tennis was over. From the previous year, tennis had become my primary form of exercise besides the occasional long distance run. Two of my friends and I played every day after school. We drove into Staunton to play on any open court we found. We did not play at the high school as they were just beginning to build tennis courts on the school grounds. We learned how to play slowly over time but quickly we got very serious about tennis. With many teenagers, we had crushes on some of our high school teachers. So after playing tennis in Staunton we found out where our high school Biology teacher lived and drove to her house just to sit in her driveway. If she was home, then sometimes she came out to greet us and gave us a drink of water. I sometimes wonder why she put up with us as we were there way too much, but she had a big part to play in my life a couple of years later so I am thankful she was so kind to us.

I never really developed any close friendships at the community college. Since there were no dormitories and every one lived at home, most people hung out with their high school buddies. Most of the students were from Staunton and already had their close knit groups of which I was not a part. I met some of them playing basketball, but I had little in common with them. I still preferred the alcohol and drug crowd, and these people wanted no part of that. I was not going to fit in with them so I was stuck with my own crowd of losers. At times it was very lonely as I drove to class and then back home to do my homework. It was like the days when I was young and longed for someone to stop by and play basketball with me on my driveway basketball court. Now I had to drive to Staunton and find someone who wanted to hang out with me. In high school it was easy as we always did something together during the weekend and talked about it

all week long in our common classes. My second year of community college was very similar to the first year, except I took all the calculus classes the school offered and did not take the variety of classes I did the first year as I knew I liked math.

## **Side jobs**

While in community college, I worked to pay for gas to drive to school and for my tuition and books. My mother did not have much extra money to help me since she had to pay the household bills. The first job I found was at a greenhouse in Staunton during the spring of my first year of college. I enjoyed the job as I got to drive the electric cart all around the grounds. I had a couple of assigned tasks. I had to help the women who were potting the spring plants. The owner, who lived next door to the greenhouses, hired many temporary employees to get ready for the spring season. Most of his income came from tomato and pepper plants. He grew them all from seeds and when they got to a certain height they all had to be transferred to a larger container. He had hundreds of each variety so this was a very time consuming transplanting process. My task was to move the plants from one greenhouse to another after the women workers transplanted them to the new pots. I also had to water the plants in a specific rotation from greenhouse to greenhouse. The owner also had a couple of greenhouses dedicated to expensive exotic plants. These had to be watered and trimmed to look perfect for the potential buyers. I had to take care of these plants and help customers find what they wanted when they arrived. It was also fun for me as I was outside most of the time driving around in the green electric cart. Most of the women were very old, but were really friendly to me and pleasant to be around. The only bad thing about my first job was that the owner's spouse was a little too friendly and tried to get me to come into their house to see her when her husband was away. I had absolutely no desire for an older woman so it was not hard to resist that temptation. All the time I worked at the greenhouses I knew it was a temporary job as the owner only needed me in the spring, so I was constantly looking for a full time summer job.

My mother helped me find a job. She had a cousin who worked at the Virginia Highway Department main office, so I went to see him. They had a policy of hiring college students for summer jobs, but he did not want to give me preferential treatment. I had to fill out an application like everyone else, but in the end I got the job. The location where I was to work was right down the road from our house about half way to the high school. I told my best friend about it when he came home on his summer break from William & Mary. He got a job also but it was not at the same location where I worked. As in most things I had done, I had no clue what was in store for me. Sometimes it is best not to be able to see into the future. Each of the highway department locations got a couple of college students to help during the summer months. We had three at my location. One of the other temporary students I knew, as we played baseball together as kids. His father and uncle worked full time at that location, so it was natural for him to work there also. He drove the mower the whole summer to keep the medians and road shoulders neat and trimmed. The other fellow was from Staunton and we were assigned to work with the other permanent workers. Each morning we all met together and the boss assigned the daily tasks and sent us along with whoever needed or wanted us. It was obvious from the first day that the other guy had never done manual labor before and he failed in every task he was given. Within a couple of days, no one wanted him on their task, so we had to go together and I did most of his work. He was not lazy, he just got very sore from the manual labor and was tired very easily. The interesting thing for me was that we were working on the roads I knew from our Sunday afternoon drives as a child. The hardest work of all was filling in the road shoulders that were developing deep ruts. This required that I got on the back of a dump truck and as the bed was raised I had to rake the gravel into the corner of the truck bed. A huge triangular piece of wood was placed in the dump truck bed to force the gravel to come out of the bed on correct side of the truck. This also caused problems as the gravel got stuck as it came out so I had to be there to make it come out in a constant flow. This was fun the first hour until my arms felt like they would fall off. Typically we did this all day long for a week, so it built up a good set of muscles by the end of the summer. We had

several different tasks so weekly changes made life more interesting. One week we patched holes in the road with asphalt that we got from the local quarry. It took an hour to get the asphalt and then we drove to the road that needed patching. Some days if big patches had to be made, then privately owned dump trucks were rented to help us. Other days we had to grade the dirt roads after a winter of hard weather and spring rains when deep ruts developed on the side of the road. This was my favorite job as it required walking in the mountains behind the motor grader with a pitch fork and throwing the big rocks from the road into the woods. It was normally shaded so it was a much cooler job than being in the hot sun paving or fixing the road shoulders. The most desired job of all was to go with the boss in his yellow pickup truck and pick up road kill. It does not sound very pleasant, but it was mostly cruising the main roads in his air conditioned comfortable truck and if any animal was dead in the road we grabbed it with a pitch fork and threw it in the ditch. Occasionally we had a deer in the road and that was hard work getting it out of the road. We rotated through this set of jobs all summer long. At the end of summer, my boss told me he would hold a job for me the next summer, which I gladly told him I wanted to return, as I enjoyed the manual labor.

After my summer of hard labor, I looked for part time jobs in Staunton. On the main road where most of the restaurants were located, I found a new restaurant being built. It was close to the greenhouse where I had worked in the spring. When they put up a sign that they were hiring, I went in and applied for any job they had available. I had no idea what it would be like to work in a restaurant, but I needed the money and I did not think twice about it. They needed general help to bus the tables, wash dishes, clean bathrooms and help the cook stock food. I started in the fall just as my second year of community college began. I worked eight hour shifts on Saturday and Sunday each weekend, which meant I had to do all of my homework during the week. This was very different labor from working on the highways. It was the first time I ever cleaned a toilet and I never got used to having to clean the women's toilet. There are still smells I can remember to this day like putting the dishes through the hot steaming dish washer and the smell of pancake batter. I had to wear a dark

brown robe to protect my white shirt and black bow tie from getting dirty as I removed the dirty dishes from the tables and cleaned them off in the kitchen. I never liked the pointy white paper hat I had to wear as I thought it made me look stupid. I did not have to worry about anyone coming in who knew me as this was not a place where teenagers hung out. I never thought of this as a career or a place to meet friends, but just a way to provide money for school. The name of the restaurant was “Sambo's” and they were primarily known for their pancakes. I could not understand how it stayed in business with such a racial name, but I knew people I had been around in Churchville were still very prejudiced. I liked most of the people at work.

One fellow I really felt sorry for as he was extremely thin but worked as hard as anyone I had ever seen. He was completely illiterate. I tried several times to teach him how to read the menu but he just could not grasp it. He always signed his timecard with an “X” since he did not know how to even write his name. He was well into his fifties so I did not see any hope of him learning at his old age. Since I stocked the freezer with food and had to supply the cook with everything they needed, I became friends with all the cooks. Sometimes they let me cook when they took a break but only if the boss was not in the store. I quickly learned how to cook all the food on the menu which included cooking the different kinds of steaks. I also got to know the waitresses as they were the ones who told me to hurry up and clean the tables so they were available for new customers. The busiest time was on Sunday when people got out of church as we often had a full restaurant. That was when I had to be very efficient to have the tables cleaned and the food to the cook as well as the dishes all clean. It was an exercise in managing many tasks well at the same time. After a couple of months, two new waitresses, who were friends with each other, started working at the restaurant at the same time. Since they were the first people to work there who were my age, I became friends with them. One of them I quickly became infatuated with, but I learned she had a boyfriend. It was hard for me to give up my infatuation even after seeing her tough boy friend come into the restaurant a few times. That meant I had to become attached to her friend since I was still a hormonal teenager. What started out as a simple friendship quickly developed into much more.

## 10. The big change in life

At the end of two years at Blue Ridge Community College, I had to decide what to do next. After talking to the school counselors and my favorite mathematics professor, I decided to try geology as a major. I loved being outside and I enjoyed the Earth Science class I had in high school, but I had no chance to pursue any further classes at the community college in this field. I took several formal aptitude tests at the college and they directed me to this field of study. I really wanted to be an art major but the low salaries art majors made scared me. I wanted to pick a field where I made plenty of money and enjoyed the work at the same time. In the meantime I chose geology, but I fully expected to change my mind once I entered a real full four year university. My next decision was in choosing the university to attend. Since my adopted grandfather attended Virginia Tech and graduated there in 1904, that seemed like a perfect place to go. Several times I looked at his yearbooks but it was like seeing ancient history books. My sister attended the University of Virginia so I had no interest in going there, although I did visit her once to see what it was like in Charlottesville. I visited Duke over the summer to see if I liked it well enough to pay the high tuition, but I was discouraged at the size of the tiny geology department at the remote location on campus. I liked the idea of being an alumni of such a prestigious school, but when they did not offer me a scholarship to cover the tuition, I forgot all about attending Duke. I visited James Madison down the road from where I grew up as my father had attended night school there for his MBA, but they also had a very small geology department. A friend of mine was attending school there so I visited his dormitory room and went to a fraternity party that evening. It was fun but I decided not to attend JMU either. That left me with the only real choice of attending Virginia Tech which at the time was called Virginia Polytechnic Institute & State University or VPI for short.

## **Party gone bad**

I was accepted for admission to Virginia Tech and had money saved for the year's tuition, the only other thing I had to arrange was a place to stay. My mother worked at the hospital in Staunton and one of the women she knew had a son who was attending Virginia Tech in the fall as well. He already had an apartment rented and a friend of his signed up to be his roommate but they needed one more roommate. I quickly told them that I wanted the third room as I had no other alternatives and my time was running out.

For the two years I was at the community college, most of my life was spent concentrating on my studies or at work saving money for university. On Friday nights I hung out with a couple of friends in Staunton, which required I drank alcohol and smoked pot. At work I met a girlfriend and she consumed the rest of my time. Having a girl friend was like a merit badge for me, so I bragged about having one to my friends. I liked the feeling of being able to go on a date when I wanted to, but my male party friends always had priority. The interesting thing about my girlfriend was that my mother and sister both did not like her. During one of my classes in community college, I over heard one of class mates saying he had slept with my girlfriend. That certainly was a shocker as I thought she was 100% my prize. It was not hurtful enough for me to give up on her though.

During the summer after completing community college, my best friend from high school returned home. We had a mini reunion at a friends rental house with the four of us making our own private party. My best friend bragged about how he belonged to the drug fraternity at his university. I thought that was interesting and odd at the same time. He brought several bottles of rum from his father's alcohol collection and some pot and hashish. He told us that he heard if you mix one-fourth of a gram of hashish with a whole bottle of rum then the affects were amazing. Since I really had nothing to brag about, I suggested we try this concoction to prove his hypothesis. I cannot say for sure what the other three did that night, but we all left after midnight to return home. On Saturday when I woke up I did not feel much different from any other day after getting high the night before. I first noticed a

problem when my mother told me to go to the IGA in Churchville and get her a few groceries. I got in my car and as I turned the sharp curve in the road next to our house I failed to remember why I was in the car. I turned around and parked in our driveway and went inside to ask mom if she asked me to do something for her. This time she gave me a list of things to buy. I got back into the car with the list and as I turned the corner again I wondered why I was in the car. I saw the list on the car seat and assumed I was supposed to get those items at the store. The rest of the week continued like this every day as I had serious issues with my short term memory. I was fearful to leave the house as I thought I would get lost or not remember what I was doing. What really scared me the most was that it was the middle of July and in August I was scheduled to attend Virginia Tech. How would I make it at university when I could not remember simple things I had just been told to do? What bothered me the most was that I had saved money for years just for this time in my life to attend a real university and get my degree to prove to everyone who knew me in high school that I was not the loser they thought I was. Now in one night I had lost it all or so I thought. I really had no one to turn to for help as I did not want to go to a doctor and admit the things I was doing and I no interest in telling my mother the truth. On Sunday I told my girlfriend by telephone about this horrible thing that had happened to me. She told me the oddest thing as she said she had become a Christian. I had no idea what she meant, but she was sure that I had to do the same. Since she was acting strangely I sought help elsewhere.

The only other person I could think of who could help me was my high school biology teacher who we used to bother after playing tennis. She was easy to talk to and always seemed willing to listen to us. I found she lived right across the road from the hospital where my mother worked, so I went to see her. I had driven many times by the hospital so I thought there was no way I could get lost in my current condition. Somehow I made it to their house that Friday night for supper. This was the first time I formally met her husband although for years I had only talked to her. They had two small children, who were the cutest things to me as they were so innocent looking. Over the meal they asked me about my life since it had been some time since

she had seen me. I had just finished reading Jerzy Kosinski's novel "The Painted Bird" so I was interested in eastern Europe. It was a bizarre book and yet interesting at the same time. It was a warped kind of reality similar to what I felt when I got high. She told me that I was welcome at their church on Sunday as a man who had been tortured for thirteen years in Bulgaria was speaking about his life experiences. She gave me a copy of the book about his life. It seemed harmless to read and I was extremely desperate for help with my memory loss problems so I thought it would take my mind off my own problems. I did not really believe anything would happen to fix my problem on that Sunday, I just had no one else to help me.

On Sunday I found the house where this family went to church. I thought it was a bit strange to have a church in someone's house. It was an old farm house in a part of Staunton that I seldom visited. Their name was familiar as relatives of theirs lived down the road from us in Churchville. It had been years since I went to any church as I did not attend after my father left our house. I had no idea what to wear so I wore what I always did which was jeans and a T-shirt. I had very long hair so I was unsure what the people in the church would think of me, but I did not care too much as I just needed some help with my problems. It certainly was a strange church as people seemed very happy to be there. It was very different from the formal Presbyterian environment I had grown up in. I finished reading Harlan Popov's autobiography the day before as I was not able to put it down once I started reading it. After singing several happy songs as a group, Popov stood up and started speaking. I had a difficult time understanding what he was saying as he had a very strong accent. I did hear him tell stories from his book that I somehow remembered, so it helped reaffirm that I was seeing a person who had really lived through things much worse than my own current problems. The thing that drew me most to the church that day was seeing a famous person who had written a book I had read. After church they had a meal together as a whole church so I was able to meet Harlan Popov in person but did not say much to him as I just failed to understand much of what he said to me.

After lunch at the church, my girlfriend suggested we go to Sherando Lake near Waynesboro for an afternoon swim with her best friends. It was hot that day so I agreed. I did not want to drive all the way back home, so we left directly after church. Her friends met us there and they had the same story to tell as my girlfriend, as they also had become Christians the weekend before. It all happened at the same church that I had just attended. My girlfriend's brother was a guitar player who led the music I had just heard at church. She told me that in the past he was in much heavier drugs than me and at one time had hair down to his waist. He had become a Christian and had experienced a great change in his life. I visited him that week as I was told he had a rare Frank Zappa album that was missing. When I got to his apartment in the company of my girlfriend he had told me that I was too late as he had destroyed all of his albums. That was shocking for me to hear that someone who followed Frank Zappa suddenly went to such an extreme and quit listening to what I considered the best guitarist in the world. I had seen my girlfriend's brother at church that morning and had seen his extremely short hair, so I figured something dramatic had happened. My hair was very precious to me and I never thought of doing such a crazy thing. After a couple of hours at the lake, my girlfriend gave me a small black and white comic book called a "Chick tract" to take home and read. From the lake to my home was around an hour's drive so I thought about the things I heard on the drive home. When I arrived home at dinner time, I went into my room and with my door closed started reading this comic book. It talked about stuff I had never heard before. Then I came to the page that showed a drawing of Jesus being tortured and beaten. It referred to a Bible verse that said Jesus was beaten beyond recognition for my sins. I started crying and somehow finished the comic book. On the back of the comic book was a list of suggestions on what to do if the tract had affected me. As I cried I prayed a simple prayer that I needed help from God as I realized I was in trouble because of the stupid things I did to myself. The only hope I had was if God somehow helped me. I prayed that I was sorry for the bad things I had done and that I accepted the good news that Jesus had died for me on the cross. It was an easy to choice to make as Jesus died for my sins and I had

plenty of those. I wanted to follow him and be a new person as I was really tired of my old life. I remember talking to my mother that afternoon and explaining what had happened to me that day. I really just wanted to tell her that I loved her which I had not done for a very long time. I was just so ashamed for the way I had yelled at her for the last few years. I knew she deserved to hear first how I wanted to be a better person. That night I felt a change in my life as I fell asleep.

## **Life as a different person**

On Monday morning I woke up early as I had to go to work at the Virginia Highway Department. I was so eager to tell all of coworkers what had happened over the weekend. The first day back on the job I was assigned to work with the asphalt crew. Two of the employees heard my story on the way to get asphalt from the quarry. They were so happy for me as they had similar experiences that summer as well. One of them was known as the local drunk and had cleaned up his life and did not drink any more. The other one was a chain smoker and had somehow given it up after twenty years of three packs a day. I found myself in a truck with two other people who had experienced the same things I did. It was a happy first day back to work. I only had one problem that week and it was my foul language. I had no interest in drinking or smoking again, but after years of cursing my language did not change overnight. I was very discouraged as I thought my whole life was transformed after my prayer to Jesus the night before. Most of that first week at work I worked with these two men. The big test came on Friday night when I normally met my friends.

It was a requirement that every Friday night I got together with friends and rode around drinking and smoking pot. Since my best friend was still in town, I decided to go with them. I was very excited to tell them of the big change in my life. As we drove into the Staunton City limits I started telling my story. Every one in the car was there the weekend before and knew I had overdone it and had lost my short term memory. They could all tell something had happened in my life so they were curious to hear about it. We talked many hours that night and then we parted our ways. I was slightly discouraged as I expected

them all to want to pray to Jesus as I had done, but maybe none of them were as desperate as I had been. I just knew that I had no interest in hanging out with them any more as they just wanted to party all the time. It was a strange feeling telling them all goodbye as we had spent so many years of our life together. It was inevitable as I was leaving for Virginia Tech soon anyway. During the final summer month at home my priorities all changed.

I found that my short term memory had been restored as a direct answer to my prayers, and now I had hope that I could do well at Virginia Tech in the fall. I wanted to learn more about Jesus so I drove into Staunton each Sunday to attend church. I was amazed at how much fun it was going to church. I got to know many of the people at the church during the lunch meals after church. We also played basketball on Sunday afternoons at the old police gym in Staunton. That was fun to play with people who did not yell and scream at each other when they missed a shot as I was used to seeing at the community college and YMCA. Some of the men at the church got together early Monday morning before going to work to pray with each other and talk about their lives. I spent the night with one of them on Sunday night and then drove to my work early Monday after our meeting. On Sunday nights I studied Dr. Martin Lloyd Jones' book "Sermon on the Mount" with the owner of the house where I spent the night. I learned more about Jesus every day. One of the interesting things about the house where I attended church was that there were nine boys in the family and one of them was my age. I used to marvel at how all of them followed Jesus faithfully with their lives and none of them had followed my path of self destruction.

One week at work a coworker asked me to go to church with him. Since it was near my home I agreed. It was a very different church from the one I grew up in and the one I was attending regularly each Sunday. I enjoyed being with him and his family as I now considered him a close friend even though he was several years older than I. Then another coworker wanted me to attend church with him. I did not think much about it as I liked seeing how different people who followed Jesus had different styles of church meetings. I was in store for something I could never have anticipated. His church was known as a

holy roller church. Every one at work warned me that I was in for a surprise so I knew something odd was going to happen. On Wednesday night I agreed to go with him to his church. I had hair way past my shoulders and no one at my church cared about my hair so I thought nothing of it. The fellow I went with and his family sat up front so I sat with them. When the church meeting started, the man standing up front started yelling at the top of his lungs. They sang a couple of songs and then the real preaching began. The preacher came down to our aisle and started yelling at me that I needed to be delivered from my sins. I found this odd since I already thought I became a Christian a few weeks previously. It then dawned on me that everyone else was dressed in suits and ties and the women all had on fancy dresses and there I was in my casual clothes. I had to look out of place with my long hair, jeans and T-shirt. He assumed from my appearance that I was a “sinner” in need of Jesus. After thirty minutes of yelling at me, the service took a unique turn. People of all ages started walking up the aisles to the front. The yelling preacher man laid his hand on their heads and they fell back on the floor and flopped around for several minutes. As I looked around I was one of the only ones still in the pews as people were even in the aisles laying on the floor. This is the only time I have experienced this kind of church, but I have heard of others in the area but I was afraid to set foot in them! Even though this was an odd experience for me, I still liked this man and enjoyed working with him. He did not have to explain these weird church behaviors to me as we worked well together.

## **11. Life outside the valley**

In the fall of 1979 I entered school at Virginia Tech. I borrowed a truck to haul a few things to my new found apartment. When I was young my father had bunk beds made for me from real yellow pine wood. Since I needed a bed when I visited home and a bed at school, I decided to saw my bunk beds in half. The bottom part of the bunk bed had two large drawers for storage which was very handy. The desk and dresser I took with me were hand made from solid wood and were extremely sturdy.

### **New friends**

I really had no idea what to expect from my new roommates and I had not even met them in person. I had the address for the apartment they had rented and located it easily once I reached Blacksburg. Both of my roommates were at the apartment when I arrived. I don't remember how it happened but somehow I got the largest bedroom in the back part of the apartment with my own bathroom. I arranged my things quickly and set out to get a feel for life at the big university. I signed up for meals at the campus dining halls since I lacked any cooking skills. My sister gave me her ten speed bike so I did not have to fight for a parking space on campus, and I used it the whole day to explore. I got my student ID with my long flowing hair and smiling face on the photo and then registered for my classes. Many of my classes transferred from community college, so I did not have to retake the basic first year classes with hundreds of students in them. I located all of my classrooms and discovered that having a bicycle was very convenient as some of my classes were far apart and I had only ten minutes between classes. While registering for classes there were several tables by the student center with groups recruiting for their activities. One of the tables I visited was by a group called Intervarsity. They were having a group picnic at one of the local parks, which was close to my apartment, so I attended that function in the afternoon. I really wanted to start out right and find friends who had common interests, or rather I wanted to avoid the party scene and those who

wanted to drink alcohol. Two of the fellows I met at this IntersVarsity picnic invited me to their church the next day. I was wondering which church to attend while in school and I gladly accepted their invitation.

The first day I walked into the elementary school where the church was held, I felt like this was where I should attend. As I walked into the school gym, I immediately saw the two guys from the previous day at the picnic, so that helped me feel at home. All three of us were new to Virginia Tech so we had a bond of being lost together. The church had an interesting idea of meeting during the week in different homes by splitting people up into smaller groups. I signed up for a group as I thought it would be a great way to get to know people better as the Sunday morning church was a bit large for me. As I learned new things from the Bible, I recalled some of the them from childhood Sunday School lessons. It was really fascinating how I knew some of the general stories from watching the religious movies on TV as a child too. The problem was that I did not know the details or how the stories were related. So I started the habit of reading my Bible every day as I wanted to see the whole picture of what the Bible was trying to say.

## **Apartment life**

My life at our new apartment did not start out very well. After a week of classes, my roommates decided they needed to celebrate with a big party on the next weekend. They knew several other people at Virginia Tech from their high schools, so they gathered them all in our three bedroom apartment. I really did not know what to do, so I decided to go to bed early and be antisocial as I had no interest in being around alcohol. This became a trend at our apartment every Friday night as they had their friends over for a beer drinking bonanza. I liked my roommates and some of their friends, but once they started getting drunk they became very obnoxious. I talked to them until they had a couple of beers and then I disappeared into my bedroom. One of the most interesting things was that they were all very pleasant to me and all heard my story of why I no longer drank alcohol. I did not want to appear too good for them so I made sure they knew it was not about

them but about my past. When they got drunk everything changed. They got very noisy way past midnight and some nights talked about me loudly saying how ridiculous it was that I did not drink with them. I am not sure why I tried to sleep, but I liked to get up early in the morning and had no interest in leaving the apartment to be by myself during the night. It definitely hurt my feelings that people I hardly knew were so critical of me for trying to be a better person. On Saturday mornings I typically talked to one of roommates during his late breakfasts about my path of following Jesus. He was always respectful when he was sober and asked me meaningful questions. We had little in common but we had great conversations about life as we tried to live it.

One of the things that my roommates did not understand was my taste in music. I followed the example of my girlfriend's brother in that I threw out all of my hundreds of albums. I wanted a new start as music for me had connotations of alcohol and drugs. It had nothing to do with whether the music was good or not, it just reminded me of the life I wanted no part of any more. I was given two cassette tapes of Christian music and took them gladly. Initially I did not listen to them much as I preferred silence. I constantly listened to loud music for years as I hated silence. One of my roommates was curious what Christian music sounded like so I left them on the kitchen table and we listened to them together on Saturday mornings sometimes. One of the artists was Larry Norman, who was quite radical at the time in Christian circles. The other one was Phil Keaggy, who was an accomplished musician before following Jesus and played mostly instrumental guitar music. That was the only music I listened to during my first year at Virginia Tech.

During the year I went home one weekend a month. I still had a girlfriend in Staunton, but I wanted to put all of my energy into my studies and thus did not leave Virginia Tech much. After a couple of roommate's parties our neighbors above us came to meet us all. The three girls were all very good looking and they all dated Tech football players. I knew from experience not to get attracted to them as I had seen their boyfriends and they were physically huge. One of the girls was taking a Geology class and continually had problems in it. When

she found out that I was majoring in Geology she asked me to help tutor her. I found it odd how anyone could have trouble in such an easy subject, but I agreed to help her. I quickly became friends with her and her roommates. It was a constant battle not to become infatuated with them, but I was reminded when their boyfriend's came around to avoid doing so at all costs! I spent more time in their apartment than my own as it became my escape when my roommate's were drinking. The girls all wanted to hear why I did not drink. They sometimes had their own wild parties, which helped me realize that I had very little in common with them anyway.

## **Let's sing**

One of the best things that happened to me that first year was meeting new friends at Intervarsity. They formed a singing group called "Ornery Critters" and they needed another person to sing with them. They traveled around the area visiting schools and churches. Two of them were excellent guitar players and the rest of them sang. At the time, it was unusual to sing contemporary songs in church as the norm was still hymns. I auditioned to sing with them and was accepted. I had singing lessons in church when I was young but other than that I had no special training, so I was pleasantly surprised to be part of the group. There were five guys and four girls in the group and they needed a replacement as one of the original founders was a senior and was becoming overwhelmed with class assignments and other commitments. I enjoyed practicing the upbeat songs that I had never heard before. They all liked me as I had exciting stories to tell about my crazy life. We rotated during public appearances telling our stories of how we became followers of Jesus. One night on a long trip across the mountains into West Virginia, two of the girls, who I was closest to, sat next to me. They said how they wished they had my great life stories as they had both grown up in Christian families and had always followed Jesus since a young age. I told them that even though my life sounded thrilling, it was full of regrets of things that I could never change. I felt like I destroyed the life of my first girlfriend in high school. I felt like my mouth got me into trouble with the athletes in high school, which caused way too much unnecessary hate. My

alcohol and drug addiction wasted years of my life which I could never get back. Those exciting stories came at a great price for me. I had memories that I did not want, but could never get rid of, most of which I will keep with myself and not share with anyone else. I think they understood better after our conversation that I would much prefer to have their life!

One of my Saturday morning regular events was visiting a Blacksburg nursing home with a couple of the people from my singing group. It was easy for me to be around elderly people as I spent so much time with my adopted grandparents. In the nursing home, I loved hearing the resident's stories and just listened to whatever they had to say. We started each morning by collecting anyone who wanted to go to the large activity room to hear us sing hymns. There were always the same faithful few who came each week and some of them wanted to hear the same hymns each week. It was questionable whether we helped them more than they helped us. They all suffered physical afflictions and were separated from their loved ones, but some of them had amazing faith and wonderful attitudes. One day as I made my rounds to collect people I saw a very young woman in her wheelchair and I made a note of her room number. After our singing session, I went back to her room and introduced myself. She was very unhappy that day, but invited me into her room anyway. She had lost her legs to diabetes and was only forty-two years ago. It was a very sad day for me to learn such things, but I stayed upbeat in front of her. We typically arrived around nine in the morning and left around noon. We sang for the first hour and then visited with as many of them as we could for the remaining two hours. From that Saturday I always tried to visit with this young woman. She never came to our sing-a-long time as she was fairly bitter at God for the life she was dealt. Over time she opened up to me and was glad to see me each week. She definitely taught me to appreciate each day I was given and to enjoy each day like it was my last.

## **Switch to Geophysics**

While attending Virginia Tech, they had a quarter system instead of the typical semesters. I was able to take more varieties of classes to get a feel for what I enjoyed. For my electives I took several Psychology classes as I liked the one I had in community college. I kept taking Calculus classes and repeatedly got A's, so the training in community college really paid off. I signed up for a computer class since my best friend's father from high school had a career in computers and I found that interesting to learn about. For the spring quarter I took a Geophysics class which was the first year the introductory class was taught. The instructor had just come from overseas and was a great teacher. Because of him and the fact that I did really well in all of my mathematics classes, I decided to switch to be a Geophysics major. I had two friends from church who were studying for their masters, one in Geology and the other in Geophysics, so I talked to them about the differences between these majors. Both Geology and Geophysics were in the same department so it was easy to switch. The biggest difference was that I had to quickly decide so I could schedule classes to finish on time. I also decided to be a Mathematics minor since I already met the minor requirements. By the time I finished my degree I was only a couple of credits short of having minors in Psychology and Computer Science as well.

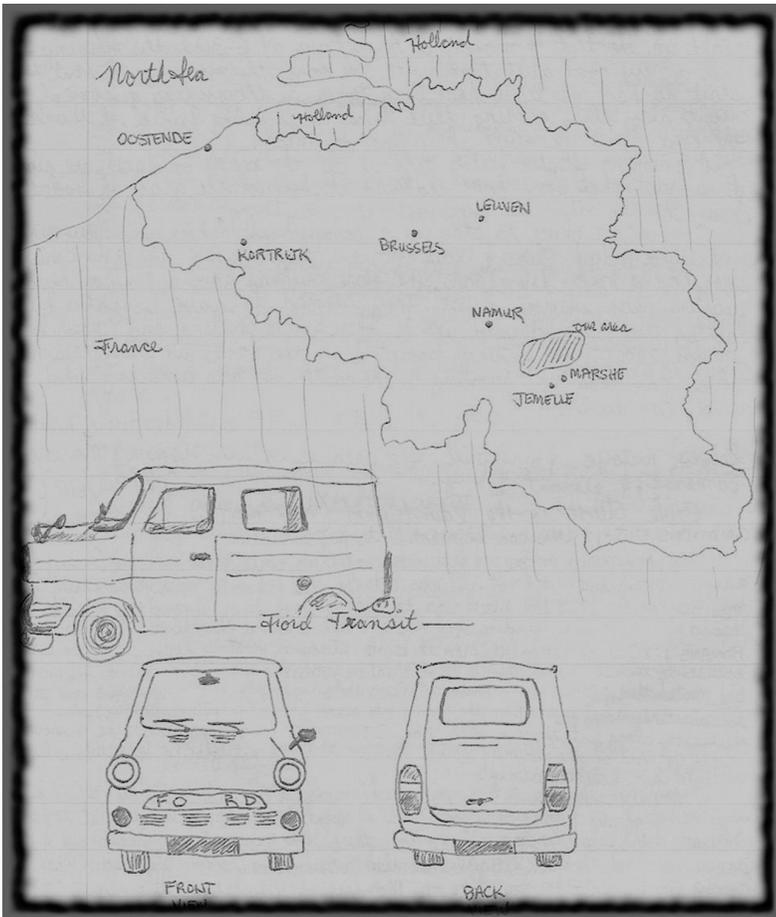
One of the interesting people I met in the Geology building was the janitor. One of the graduate students told me that he was interested in attending our church but was very shy. After a few weeks I finally spotted him cleaning one afternoon, so I introduced myself. He had a terrible stuttering problem so it was hard to understand him but with patience we became friends. I visited his home a couple of times; however, his mother was very suspicious of me. She did not understand why I paid attention to her son. When I visited his home I found out that his grandfather was very famous. On the walls, I saw photos of the automobiles that his grandfather had invented. It made sense as his last name matched the brand name for the cars! I learned that this young fellow really wanted to overcome his stuttering and attended sessions with a speech pathologist at a local community

college. My new mission was to help him by conversing with him daily. I saw over time that he was improving but most of it was due to him being comfortable around me. For spring break he told me that there was a Christian festival at Myrtle Beach that he wanted to attend. His mother told him that he could not go by himself, so he asked me to go with him. It was a huge decision for me as I wanted to go home to be with my girlfriend during that time. He had a small tent so I wondered if we would bother each other after spending such close quarters with each other. I realized how disappointed he would be if I told him I would not be able to go, so I gladly accepted the invitation to go to the beach. At the time, these kind of events were just starting out as the idea of a Christian band was very new. There were several bands that played, none of which I remember. It was very hot at the beach and it got quite warm under the tent, but somehow we were able to sleep. The drive was over six hours so we had to leave early Sunday afternoon to make it back that evening. Overall we both had a great time and we talked about everything on the drive down and back.



# Section Four

## Start of a lifetime adventure



## **12. Decision to leave USA**

During Christmas break in my first year at Virginia Tech, we had special quests come to our church from a group called Operation Mobilization (OM). One of the leaders at our church knew the founder of OM and several other people had been with them in the past. My tenth grade biology teacher, who invited me to church the first time, had been in Jordan with OM for two years along with her husband. There were many connections between my church and OM that spanned many years. Three young men came to our church for a weekend visit and were from South Africa, Scotland and Ireland. They spent time on one of the cruise ships that OM used to sell books at sea ports all around the world. To see these young fellows, who were my age, talking with strange accents and excited about Jesus made a great impression. I talked to them at great length during the special church luncheon. The Irish man became a follower of Jesus while in India as he initially went there as a hippie on the 1960s drug trail. He was one of the most out going people I ever met and was very easy to talk to. He was the first person I ever met who had been to India.

### **Big decision**

When I returned to Virginia Tech my studies became my number one priority and I did not think about the fellows I met during Christmas break. I made the impromptu decision to get engaged to my girlfriend on Valentine's Day, even though my mother and sister still had serious reservations about me doing so. I felt guilty for the time I spent with her as I had been dating her for three years, most of which was before I followed Jesus with all my heart. I was definitely still infatuated with her but mostly because of premarital sex that caused a deeper attachment that was unhealthy for someone my age. After following Jesus, no one had to tell me that it was wrong to have sex before getting married as I always known it was wrong, I just never cared enough to stop. I felt truly sorry for having had sex so many times before marriage so I thought is was reasonable to make amends for my bad behavior by agreeing to marry her. At the same time I started

thinking of what to do that summer as I had enough money for college and I did not want to work at the Virginia Highway Department again. I asked my girlfriend if she wanted to go with me to Europe with OM for the summer. She agreed to go with me, but mostly for the experience of seeing Europe, whereas for me I wanted to go to do something useful with my life that was not selfishly motivated. Strangely enough after making the decision, we seemed to argue more than we got along. It was not a very good new start for either of us.

### **Akron conference**

After school finished for the year, the OM conference began the following weekend for those going to Europe for the summer. There were over one hundred young people from all over the USA at a large church in Akron, Ohio for a week. It was an orientation to help those going to know what to expect and be prepared for the big event that would change our lives forever or so we were told. One of the speakers for the conference was from Charlottesville so he drove up with my girlfriend and myself to Ohio. Housing was arranged when we got there and the conference speaker and I stayed at the same house owned by a Scottish family. They were wealthy in my eyes as they had a huge boat in the driveway and a large spacious house. We both had our own bedroom and bathroom, which was certainly not something I expected. Each morning when I woke up I found my Scotsman host sitting in his recliner reading his Bible. He always had some great words of wisdom to share during breakfast when the whole family met together. It seemed so other worldly to me as I never sat down to eat breakfast with my family at home and definitely did not talk about God over meals.

The man who rode up with me from Virginia was the featured speaker on the second night of the conference. He talked about his experiences in India where he followed one of the top gurus in South India. He certainly had a wild life in India, so from that day on as we drove to our host home and back I talked to him about India. He grew up in the drug culture on the early 1970s and had gone to India to find God and use narcotics. He told me countless stories about his life that were hard for me to understand fully. Sometimes in the morning as we

drove to the conference, he had weird twitches throughout his body. He explained to me that the excessive hard drug use for so many years made irreparable damage to his nerve endings and that caused him to get the shakes. He also said the same feelings and experiences that he had using hard narcotics were attained drug free while meditating in India. I wanted to listen to his stories for hours, but I definitely got an ear full each morning and evening on our drives.

At the very back of the large conference room were several tables set up with literature from different countries where OM offices were located. I found information on Belgium since that was where I was going for the two summer months. Near to that table was one dedicated to India. The two people standing at the table presented one of the afternoon sessions on India. Since there were some people joining for one and two years, OM covered all the locations at this one conference. Because I had heard so much about India, I went to a talk to these two people. One of them was from India and he was the first Indian I ever met. He had a slight accent as he had been in the USA for the last nine years, but his speaking was still odd to me. I gathered up all the Indian brochures and packets and took them to read later when I got home. On the drive back to our host home we continued to talk about India as I was becoming more fascinated by it with each passing day.

## **Life in the Bronx**

When I was younger, we drove to New York City for a vacation. We went up to the top of the Empire State Building, which amazed me as I looked down on the city below. We also drove through the Bowery part of Manhattan and saw the derelicts laying on the streets. That was all I remembered from my first visit to New York City. As part of my warm up for the OM Europe trip, I decided to volunteer for two weeks with a church in the middle of the Bronx. The church I attended in Blacksburg had a connection to this church somehow. They always wanted people to come help them do various things, so even though I had no idea what I would be doing, it just seemed like a great way to help others. The church was really a house in the middle of a group of burned out high rise apartments. I stayed on the third floor which was

an attic converted into a small bedroom. I shared the room with a young man who was working on his doctorate at one of the hospitals in New York City. He was an avid bicyclist so on the first weekend I arrived he and I took a ten mile bike ride from the Bronx to the very tip of Manhattan through Central Park. The amazing thing was that the city seemed to be abandoned as we left shortly after church ended at noon and got back in the late afternoon. It was fun riding down the normally busy streets on our bikes and not have to worry about getting hit by cars or stopping for red lights. It was a wonderful first weekend in New York City.

During the week some of us went door to door and invited people to come to their house church. I was shocked at how cautious every one was when they answered the door. Most people did not open their doors at all and talked to us through the door. Others cracked the door with the chain still fastened to the door. We left a short pamphlet at each door whether we talked to them or not. Most of the apartments we entered had a single long corridor on a floor so we walked up and down the hall and knocked on each door. We only did this during the day and I felt very safe as we always went in groups of four. For the first week we were invited into only a couple of apartments. At night the whole area took on a completely different identity.

One night as I was in the finished attic reading, I heard a noise and looked down to the road below. I saw a huge black limousine pulled up to the small shop next to the church. A couple of people were yelling something at each other. My doctor roommate saw me looking out and told me to quickly move away from the window. He told me that the limousine pulled up from time to time as it belonged to a Mafia boss who ran the local illegal numbers racket. When they first bought the house and made it into a church he came over to tell the owners that he would allow them to stay and not bother anyone in the church if they ignored him and pretended he was never at the club next door. It was a mutual agreement as he ruled the whole neighborhood. Some nights we went out in the small front yard and listened to the sounds of the Bronx nightlife down the street from us as it was very loud at times. People stood all down the sidewalks in front of the buildings talking and doing who knows what until well past midnight

each night. Right across the road from the church were two completely burned out and abandoned five story apartment buildings. It looked like a war zone all around that part of the Bronx. It was other worldly for me, but I always felt safe in their home. Looking back I see how Jesus protected us in that crazy place and it was a perfect practice for the next few years of my life.

## **Off to Belgium**

My intention all along was to go for the summer to Belgium and return to university in the fall to finish my Geophysics degree. I thought it would be a great experience and for the first time in my life I was going to do something unselfish. I left all of my college furniture in our apartment in Blacksburg as my roommates were staying for the summer. I left my car at my mother's house. The previous summer I got my own dog for the first time. He was a black salt-n-pepper schnauzer that my mom and I found for \$35. He was cheap because he was not a pure breed registered dog, but I did not care about that at it. We became fast friends. It was hard leaving him at home when I went to back to college, but it was always fun to see him when I arrived back home on visits. My mother liked to have him around, so leaving him for the summer with her was not that big of a deal either. It was a mutual decision that my girlfriend and I should not see each that summer as we were going to be in different parts of Belgium. We wanted to have exclusive experiences to see if we got closer or in the end decided to part our separate ways. We started our trip together on a train ride to New York City from my hometown.

There was an Amtrak railway station in Staunton where we boarded our train in the early morning hours. I had not been on a train, so already the experience was interesting from the start. We had been given clear directions on where to go once we reached Union Station in downtown New York City. We got on a shuttle van from the railway station to JFK airport. The ride alone was shocking to me. The driver seemed to be in a huge hurry and drove unlike anyone I had ever seen. He clearly exceeded the freeway speed limit and was only a few feet away from the vehicle in front of us. Many times I thought for sure we

would crash. Tourism was the last thing on our minds as it was a quick rush to the airport for us so we saw little of New York City.

One of the things that OM was known for was frugal living. The flight to Belgium for the two hundred of us was on a very old charter plane on an obscure airline called Evergreen Airways. Somehow OM got super discount rates for our group. There was talk that this flight was one of the last ones as it was going out of business soon and would only concentrate on cargo planes. Our flight was an overnight flight and we arrived in the morning at the port city of Oostende. I remember being amazed seeing the houses below which all had orange tile roofs. Everything from that point on that the summer was a new set of experiences for me. On landing, we took luxurious European tour buses to Leuven where we had a brief set of meetings specifically on Belgium. It was where we met our fellow teammates for the summer.

## 13. French Belgium

My first night in Europe was spent at the Catholic University of Leuven. I learned it was the oldest Catholic university in the world. OM rented part of the university since the campus was empty for the summer. It had perfect facilities as there was a huge auditorium designed for simultaneous multiple language translation. Since Belgium was a country split into half with two different spoken languages, the university facilities were designed with this dilemma in mind. There was a large cafeteria where we all met for our three daily meals. Those who joined for the summer, no matter what country they were going to, met at the conference center in Leuven. I was amazed to see people from all over the world. In the general meetings there were over ten languages simultaneously spoken with the translators visible behind the glass wall above the speaker. Those needing translation used headphones. It was all fascinating to me. These were the countries I knew were present at the conference: Algeria, Belgium, Cameroon, Egypt, Finland, France, Germany, Great Britain, Holland, Ireland, Jordan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Scotland, Singapore, South Africa, Spain, and Switzerland. It was like living in the World Book Encyclopedia that I used for school reports which was coming to life before my very eyes. It was an amazing feeling for such a county mouse like myself to be part of this global group of people from all parts of the world brought together for a common bond of telling others what Jesus had done for us. I also realized that I was part of something much bigger thing than anything I ever conceived was possible. For the previous years all I wanted to do was leave my home town, but now I was part of a global group who sometimes could not communicate with each other, but somehow had a common bond. It was an awesome feeling to know there are people from all different cultures and languages coming together for a common cause.

During the nights we were allowed to walk into town as long we went together with a group so as not to get lost. I was fascinated by the Leuven Town Hall as it looked like a huge church cathedral and was built in the fifteenth century. It reminded me of the cathedrals I had

studied in my art appreciation class; however, I had only seen them in photos. St. Peter's Church at the other end of the downtown area was not as elaborate as this Town Hall, but it was still impressive in its own right with huge flying buttresses. The headquarters for Stella Artois beer was there also, which was evident by the numerous signs for the native Belgium beer. It was not tempting for me to want one as OM had a strict policy that no Americans could drink beer as well as no boy and girl could be alone, both of which suited me just fine. I saw Stella Artois signs all over Belgium for the next two months. I also did not expect Pomme Fritz to be so popular as they were sold at road side stands for BF 25 (Belgium Francs). These were much tastier than our French fries as there were many tasty sauces available to dip the hot Fritz into. One day I went in a Belgian supermarket to see what it was like. Clothes were sold in the middle of the store and on one side was fresh oven baked bread given directly to the customers after being hand sliced. Butter, cheese, yogurt and sterilized milk were not refrigerated as well as the cold cuts like bologna, bacon and steaks, which were all under the counter and unwrapped. I also noticed the thin vanilla waffles that we had one night for supper was sold in mass quantities. After leaving I knew I was in another country, as it was a very different experience than from grocery stores I was used to seeing.

One of my primary tasks was to be a driver, so I had to take a driving test on the narrow cobbled streets of Leuven. We used an old VW bus for the test as several of us went out in the bus to be tested by one of the chief OM mechanics. It was a very different driving experience as the walls of the buildings formed the road boundaries and there was no room for error. We had a couple of close calls and one of the drivers nearly took off the mirrors on one extremely narrow street. After remaining calm and passing my test, we were driven back to our sleeping quarters. My first taste of the simple living conditions was how we slept. I brought a sleeping bag with me and everyone collected their OM cushions to put their sleeping bag on, which turned out to be flattened cardboard boxes! I slept very well after taking a shower under the ice cold water in the bathroom. It had European style toilets with pull down flush levers hanging from the raised water tanks near the ceiling. To some these conditions may have seemed harsh but

to me it was great as I felt that suffering would make me a better person. That kind of thinking would get me in trouble later on in my OM life.

## **French Walloon Ardennes**

My first team members were from Switzerland (Pierre), Germany (Elias), England (John, Hazel and Christine) and USA (Marsha and I). Pierre was from the French part of Switzerland and had been in Senegal with OM for a couple of months until he got hepatitis, which had hospitalized him for a month. He had to leave Africa as a result and had been in Belgium for the last month at the OM base. He was a natural leader and was very easygoing. I became really good friends with Elias, the only German on the team. It was not that the Elias and I had a common language as we struggled talking to each other, but it was one of those unexplained common bonds that surpass language barriers. Even though we walked all day long, we still had plenty of energy to wrestle each night. I found that it was hard talking to Hazel, one of the British women on our team, as she spoke in a foreign language to me. She was the oldest one on our team and since we were both strong willed, we often disagreed on every issue. It was hard for either of us to back down. Marsha's mother died right before she joined OM and it was very hard on her, but she felt like her mother would have wanted her to join anyway. John taught me how to play soccer as it was not a sport I was used to playing. Christine had the best temperament of us all and was always pleasant to be around even though she was the youngest on the team. While the rest of us talked and argued at times, she served us all and never caused any trouble. She was a great example to all of us.

We were assigned to the Ardennes region of southern Belgium where French was the dominate language. There were several other teams in the French part of Belgium and we all met at the central location of Namur. The drive from Leuven to Namur was really beautiful as it reminded me of my home. There were rolling hills all around with an occasional house that looked like a castle. We saw farms which were totally enclosed with high gray stone walls. The

buildings we saw from the road were old but the highways were very well kept. I was used to seeing road signs so the absence of them was odd to me, but I definitely did not miss the American billboards as those made any countryside look nasty. I saw fields of grain which looked like rye or wheat and occasionally fields of lettuce or cabbage. A strange site for me were the forests with large trees planted in straight rows like corn.

Besides being the driver for our European Ford Transit, which was like a combination between a construction van and a station wagon, I was also responsible for the equipment given to the team for the first month, which included a cooking stove, tents and bicycles. The tents were new and were to be my home for the next month. They were three man tents with an orange interior and brown mosquito mesh cover for the door and a green covering shell to protect us from rain.

Pierre helped me with my French phrases so I could speak to people as we went door-to-door. The slogan for the summer was “*Jésus dans ton coeur révolution dans ta vie*”, which was easy to memorize. We had stickers and posters with this saying to place on all community bulletin boards. It was definitely frustrating for me as I was able to memorize a few phrases but if someone spoke to me then I had no clue what they were saying. The days seemed very long as the sun came up at 6 a.m. and then it got dark around 10 p.m. The plan was for each team to go out to a different region and then meet back in Namur during the weekends where we set up our tents at the back of the church on the grass lawn and had a Sunday church together.

While out on the team for the first week near the village of Nameché, we searched for a place to stay by asking local farmers if they had any place for us to stay. On our third stop we were offered a place in their barn, which for us seemed like deluxe accommodations. They had running water in the barn and a toilet so we had everything we needed for the week. We used a laundry facility in the town of Andenné to wash clothes which cost BF 95 for six kilograms of wash. It was fun doing laundry as it was near to the cliffs which had a river flowing around them. There were many rock quarries along the river also. It made me wonder about the Geology of that area.

Daily we went from door to door selling books and Bibles. We rotated who went with each other for that day. I was the only one who had absolutely no exposure to the French language, so it was a struggle for me. The more I spoke the easier it became though. We always looked forward to the apartment complexes since we did not have to walk as far to reach people to talk to them. Some parts of town were poor and no one wanted to buy books, so we gave them free tracts. Other parts were wealthy and they did not want to buy books either. There was not any pattern at all in who wanted books or did not so we knocked on every door. Since my language skills were bad I found my primary gift was smiling and enjoying myself. Many times the people who came to the door were frowning and left smiling as they saw our happy faces. We were pleasant even if they did not buy any books. The money we sold for the five different French books paid for our meals, petrol for the Transit and laundry for the week.

Since I lacked foreign language skills, I was appointed to buy food at the grocery store. That also was a challenge but I was thankful for every picture on the can or box labels. We had fresh cauliflower and carrots each for BF 20. The Dutch cheese was BF 16 and along with fresh bread was extremely tasty. I had never liked cheese, because of my milk intolerance during my youth, but during those days in Belgium I learned to like it. The fresh fruit pies made of plum, cherry and peach were really tempting. A typical day resulted in us selling about BF 600 of books, so it was a great lesson for my first week in Belgium that we could depend on the God to provide for our food and petrol. If someone bought all five of the books we were selling along with a French Bible then we got BF 200. Daily we walked many miles and at times we sold nothing while others sold many books. It was unpredictable which made life interesting.

For a change once a week, we went to the Andenné indoor swimming pool. We arrived at closing time and Pierre persuaded them to let us swim for twenty minutes. We also enjoyed a hot shower at the end of our swim. That small event raised all of our spirits as it was a great break from the book selling and walking.

On leaving our farm house that first week we followed the excellent principle of leaving it better than we got it, so we cleaned the bathroom until it was spotless and tidied up the barn. I enjoyed the cleaning part and straightening the Transit as it made up for my lack of language skills. One of the other principles I learned was how to redeem my spare time on the weekends. Daily I read my Bible by selecting a part of the Old Testament, a Psalm and part of the New Testament, with a goal to read the whole Bible within a calendar year. I also read a couple of books by A.W. Tozer which I never found time to read while in school.

During the second week, we visited a church in Jemelle (near Rochefort) where we heard the history of that church. Billy Graham came to Brussels in 1927 and afterwards around one hundred twenty people from Marsh (near Namur) formed a church. That church was dissolved in the 1940s when German soldiers killed the leader and several church members; the others fled for their lives. In the 1960s Belgian Evangelical Mission formed a new church with some of the returning original members. Quite an interesting story to hear in person! We then moved onto Gesves as we had been told to see a church youth pastor in that town. He invited us into his simple home and it was the first Belgium house I visited. He offered us Tanzanian tea and showed us the Belgium way to drink tea by dipping sugar cubes in the tea and then sucking on the tea soaked sugar cubes. He offered to let us stay with him for the week, so we were all set. He had a temporary port-a-potty style bathroom which was way beyond full. This was teaching me humility and to be thankful for the little things.

In this area I noticed several large Romanesque churches. Two of them I looked in as I had studied this kind of architecture in community college but had never seen it in person. I typically dropped people off in the different towns and stopped in a town with who ever was my partner for the day. Near supper time I reversed my path and picked up everyone and then returned to Jemelle. As I drove over the whole country side, it struck me how many crosses, crucifixes and small shrines of Mary existed on every road; yet very few people wanted the books we were selling. Pierre attended a meeting one evening with ten locals who were studying the Bible together and was

told that the Mormons and Jehovah Witnesses had recently been in the area and they thought we were some other cult. In one village, called Crubet, we saw a large shrine to St. Anthony that looked like a cave carved into the solid rock. Inside the cave was four different statues with candles in front of them. There were also coin boxes everywhere in and around the cave for pilgrims to give alms. There were plaques all around describing St. Anthony and the healing powers of this shrine. There were a couple of people milling around but as we went through the village selling books we asked about this shrine and everyone we talked to didn't seem to care about it. It was right in the center of the village so we thought it was an important landmark but it was not to most of the villagers, which was odd.

During this time at the weekend group gathering, I started contemplating staying longer with OM and going to India. It was increasingly in my thoughts with every passing week. For our next to last week together we had trouble finding a place to stay for the week. We went to two castles, five farms, and five schools which took us all day long. We even visited a place with a sign "*Imp-Enfant Jésus*" and found it was a nursing home for the elderly and handicapped. We finally decided to stay in a boarding house we had seen that was the same price as a nearby camp ground. For a total of BF 490 a day we had a comfortable place to stay with hot water showers and the bonus of having a Ping Pong table which we enjoyed in the evenings. It rained on and off each day and some days were cold so camping was not an appealing option. Some days it was 75 degrees and sunny and then it quickly turned cold and rainy. We went for a swim once that week at Ciney, which was always so refreshing. At the middle of the week we found out that instead of BF 70 per person for a total of BF 490, it was BF 50 for sleeping and BF 70 for breakfast, so we got really serious about selling books! We soon learned the number of books we sold had nothing to do with us. Some days, the harder we tried the fewer books we sold, so we spent each morning praying together before going out. At the end of the week, we had BF 5300 which was more than enough for the BF 2940 we owed the boarding house. Yet another lesson of trusting God to supply everything we needed.

On our final weekend at Jemelle was spent watching games at the local soccer field. We met an older man from the church at the soccer field who had been with OM two years at the vehicle base in Zaventem. He bought us tickets to see the 6 p.m. college soccer match. He then bought us all Stella Artois beer. The only reason I drank it was to make him feel like I appreciated his company, even though I did not feel comfortable doing so. Later on that was a character trait that became detrimental to my health. During the soccer match one of the players was far better than the rest and we were told he was from Ivory Coast. It was the first soccer match I ever watched.

For the last week in the French part of Belgium, we decided to camp for BF 295 a night. There was a river running next to the campground and we saw where the flooding from the previous week caused the river to overflow the banks. At the campground we met a Hare Krishna man whose car broke down. He told us the Hare Krishna's bought an old castle near Somme-Leuze. There was a group of them all dressed in their orange sheets and their heads cleanly shaved, all except for tiny pony tails in the back of their heads. Since their castle was close by we drove him as he had no way to get his car running again. I was amazed why this Belgium man chose such a strange path in life.

During our time in the French part of Belgium we stayed in the towns of Naméche, Gesves, Natoye and Fromville which is the area between Namur, Marche-en-Famenne, Dinant and Huy. We sold 828 books, 31 family packs and 16 Bibles. We talked to someone who had tried the same thing with OM back in 1972 and his team was doing really well if they sold 20 books per team in a month. When we parted, we all felt like we had been part of something special. One of the last days was illustrative of our month together. We visited a huge castle in Havelange with a water moat and knocking on that door was certainly an odd feeling. The homeowner came to the door and told us he had never bought anything and was not going to start now. One woman saw us from across the street and came over to buy a book from us. Such different reactions from people of very different backgrounds.

## 14. Flemish Belgium

Before moving to a different team, we all drove back to Leuven and this time met at the Latin American Institute part of the Catholic University of Leuven. Fewer people were at the conference this time than the first conference at the beginning of the summer as those who were staying in Belgium for the summer were the only attendees. I again helped the head OM electrician setup the conference room facilities as I had helped him the last time. We worked on the sound system and checked all the headphones at each seat to make sure they were working for the multiple translations. Each part of the huge conference room had an assigned language, which was connected to a specific translator behind the big glasses wall at the center of the stage. It took us all day to set up the room. Since we had fewer people, instead of all the fellows sleeping in a large room, this time we shared rooms with one other person. I was assigned to be roommates with a Canadian fellow named Ed, who I met in Akron, and was going to be the cook on one of the OM ships. We had a great time together. He told me about his time at Prairie Bible Institute in Alberta and I started to think that maybe I should return to the USA and enter Bible school instead of thinking about going to India. It was during this break that I really started thinking seriously of going to India long term. I had first thought about it in Akron but had put it in the back of my mind as some people told me I should stay in school and only go for the summer. Practical things started to enter my head. What would I do with my car at home, how would I cancel my apartment lease, what would happen to my dog, all my friends at Virginia Tech would graduate in my absence, and then I had the problem of being engaged and finally how would I raise money for two years in India? So many questions with few solid answers. During one supper meal I sat next to a German fellow named Hans who had been with OM for three years in Iran and India. He just fueled the fire by telling me exciting stories of India, which only made me want to go even more.

Then I met someone I had seen in Akron who had been in India for a couple of years and was consumed with talking about India. He

told me that six months in India was like three years anywhere else and that I should go as it would change my life forever. He knew all about the current situation for Americans as it did not sound very good. For non-commonwealth citizens, they had to leave India every six months if on a tourist visa. People going to India used to go to Iran for the alternating six months but that was now closed to Americans because of the recent hostage crisis. Pakistan was closed due to a war going on. Afghanistan was open but only for a one month visa. Sri Lanka was open but tourists had to exchange \$5 each day to stay in the country. One of the OM ships was going to be visiting ports all around India so I could jump on the ship. I met several of the top OM leaders to talk to them about going as well and they told me to count the cost of going as it is not an easy place for someone as young as I was. There were several reasons why I could not go home after the summer in Belgium if I signed up to go to India for two years. The reasons were the cost of the flight to USA and back and the jet lag for such a quick two week flight. It would be easier just to make a few telephone calls to complete the details.

I met a fellow who was going to Afghanistan to work with refugees as part of a school group project. They were going to take classes each morning and then help the refugees all afternoon long and on weekends. It sounded really interesting but he said they were full and it would take a miracle for me to get into that program.

In talking to the leader over all of those going to India in what was called Eastward Bound, he told me I had to make a decision before the conference ended and I went on my next Belgium team. He definitely had concerns about someone as young as myself going to India. After spending some time with him and explaining my life story and why I wanted to do something meaningful with my life after wasting so much of it, he agreed after some thought that I could go. I was clearly becoming consumed by India way too much, so I was given another temporary assignment.

I was asked to drive to Liege to pick up all the bicycles used in the French part of Belgium. We also had to take a long drive to Tournai near Lille, France. We stopped at the main OM base to make

sandwiches for our journey and it was the first time I had my favorite lunch of peanut butter with honey since leaving the USA. It was the small things in life that I was already starting to appreciate. We had a flat bed truck that ran on LPG fuel so we had to be diligent in looking for proper refueling stations on our long drive. The cost of LPG was BF 13 per liter which was half the cost of petrol, so for long trips it was the perfect way to travel. We drove across the French part of Belgium collecting bicycles. We arrived in Tournai at 11:30 p.m. and were very tired but our hosts took very good care of us. When we woke up in the morning I had a new experience for breakfast. They fed us Muesli, which was a mixture of uncooked oats, raisins, nuts and other grains. We put apple juice on the Muesli and it was the best thing I had eaten for a long time. On the drive back, since we did not have to make multiple stops, we were arrived in Leuven by 11 a.m. When back at Leuven I was recruited to deposit bicycles in the Flemish part of Belgium, which was another task to keep my mind off myself and to help others instead.

For my journey, my sole passenger was from Hampton, England and our first destination was Ghent, which we made before dark. We had been told to ask for the famous castle in the middle of the town as the church we needed to visit was right next door. I was a bit concerned since I had gotten lost a couple of times in the French part of Belgium and without knowing French it was impossible to get directions. However, in the Flemish part of Belgium it was so different. In the ten times we asked directions, we received replies in English, which was definitely a great thing. When I first saw the classic medieval castle it reminded me of what I had seen in the "Three Musketeers" movie as it had a moat and a river around it. No one was at the church so we looked around the castle and moved around the town on foot. When we returned to the church we found the pastor. He told us his church had one hundred twenty-five members, which was a very large non-Catholic church for Belgium. Our final destination for that day was Mechelen. We got lost and had to ask a police woman if she could help us. We got lost again and finally just parked the truck and knocked on the closest door. Surprisingly this man's son had been with OM for five years and he was now a

professional pianist in Rome. His next door neighbor was the man's brother who we were looking for! It was small things like this that helped build my faith in believing that God would always take care of us. We finally arrived back in Leuven at 1:30 a.m. after getting lost a couple more times.

## **Flemish Harentals**

My second month in the Flemish northern part of Belgium was very different from my first month in the French southern part. My second team members were from Ireland (Trevor), Malaysia (Paul), Singapore (Irene), Holland (Ruben), Finland (Simis and Ritva) and USA (Jim and I). One of the obvious differences from the beginning was that my second leader was new to OM and decided to follow all the OM rules exactly. I was determined to keep my mouth shut this time and not cause trouble by disagreeing with every thing I did not like. Everyone else was so friendly and pleasant which was a great encouragement to me. Paul had an interesting story as he had a black belt in Karate and knew several ways to kill people. He had been a bouncer at a bar for a profession. He had an unusual talent as could do a Russian split that took him seven years to accomplish. He could put two chairs next to each other with a space between them and then put one foot on each chair and then bend his body below the chair seats. He gave up doing Karate because of the extreme psychological effects it had on him. He also never wanted to put himself in a position where he had to defend himself as he had become a strict pacifist once he followed Jesus. When moving around the Flemish part of Belgium we saw real windmills in Hulshout and I asked Ruben about life in Holland. He told us that he used wooden shoes when working in the garden or any outside work. He also told us of the massive fields of tulips. It was amazing to me that I was talking to someone who knew about such exotic things. At the time I began with my Flemish team I was about 95% sure I would go to India, but I was waiting for my home churches to respond with financial support and to commit to praying for me.

Our first stop as a team was in Lier to go swimming and to take a shower, for the cheap cost of only BF 20. I looked forward to every

swim that whole summer. Our first week was spent in Westerlo with a Flemish family. The guys stayed in a large tent in the backyard while the girls stayed inside. The family had a three month old girl, who provided entertainment for us all. We heard the story of their church as originally they had sixty people in this area who met together for a church. They bought a house just for their meetings, which was the building we were currently in. Over time the numbers dropped and now there was only four people meeting together, which was a great financial hardship on the family we were staying with. We had a great time living with them as I got to see how a Belgian family lives. By USA standards they were poor, but for me it was the best possible place to be. They ate raw hamburger meat every evening and always had bread at the table along with home made yogurt. Each night we had a couple of sauces to put on the raw hamburger like yellow plums, black cherries, creamed beets, creamed cheese, brown sugar, and chocolate. The minced hamburger was mixed with eggs and bread with spices added, very similar to meat loaf except it was not cooked. I never thought they went together, but I ate it without any questions. Annemie, the woman of the household was an amazing cook. She baked bread daily for us along with cakes and the daily batch of fresh yogurt. After 10 p.m. each night, when electricity was the lowest cost, she would do all of our laundry for us. I had never seen such a person who loved to serve guests in such humility.

They had the church meeting in their home the first Sunday we were there. They all sang from their hearts and were full of praise. It was interesting to see such a lively church, which reminded me of the ones I attended in Staunton and Blacksburg. At the end I requested special prayer for my decision to go to India. Since I was not able to go home, I wanted their church to do this for me as a special send off. I felt like I was home even though I was a long way away in a different country with a foreign language being spoken at the church. It was an amazing feeling and very encouraging.

The slogan for this part of Belgium was the same as the French one but in Flemish "*Jezus in je hart revolutie in je leven*". As we started going door to door I immediately saw this was going to be a different month as most people spoke English to us at the doors.

I really liked the Flemish Bible we were selling as it looked modern with a bright yellow flower on the white cover and a message on the back. The company who made the Bibles had a problem with their glue so OM got them instead of the company throwing them away and then rebound them and sealed them with a plastic cover. They sold for BF 100, which seemed like a true bargain. We also sold a book written by fifteen Flemish people who had come to believe in Jesus. All the Flemish books cost more than the French ones we sold the month before as the translation was more costly. The best thing of all was that I was able to talk to people at the doors and told them a quick version of my life story, something I had not been able to do in the French part. We had several interactions with young people, but most of them made fun of us and wanted no part of what we were doing. Ruben and I became fast friends, similar to Elias and I had the month before.

The books sales were dramatically different in the Flemish part of Belgium. The man we were staying with thought it was a good idea to set up a book table in the center of the town during the market. In three days we sold 130 Bibles, books and family packs. I sold more Bibles myself than the whole team did the month before in the French part of Belgium. In our first week we sold 46 Bibles and 269 books and we made BF 14,000, so we sent BF 8,000 to the main OM base. That was a great feeling to be able to share with others who had trouble with their book sales. It made me feel better knowing we could tell interested people to contact Herman. One day a group from Antwerpen called the “Jesus People” came and it was really interesting being around Belgian followers of Jesus as that was a new experience for me. Every day someone on the team was approached on the street or at a door step who want to know about Jesus. It was shocking to me to see such interest as we had no such experiences the month before.

For the second week in the Flemish part of Belgium we moved to Herentals where another Belgian Evangelical Mission church was located. The girls all slept in the baby nursery and we slept in the attic. In our first evening in the house we heard about the lives of the man and woman we were staying with. Rien had been a full fledged drug addict and hippie. Although I did not claim to have been that wild, I definitely related to everything he said. We had the same music tastes

in our past lives which showed me that we had similar personalities even though we grew up far away from each other. He let me listen to his Bob Dylan Christian albums. Dylan's music definitely encouraged me in that someone of his stature would dare to talk about Jesus. One day Rien and I went door to door together. We had two events that have never happened to me before nor since. The first woman was 30 years ago and had lost her son two years before in a car crash. Her other son was seriously mentally retarded. She started crying her heart out in front of us. She told us that she quit reading her Bible after her son was killed as she was mad at God. We stayed for a while as Rien spoke to her in Flemish to comfort her. The second woman was 60 years old and had lost her son in an airplane wreck two years previously. She started crying after telling me that I reminded her of her only grandson. We stayed a long time at this house as she wanted to talk to me about why I was there in Belgium.

For the weekend I needed to drive to the main OM base in Zaventem to discuss my going to India with the leaders. I had fully decided to go, until I got to the base and read my mother's letter. I had just finished talking to one of the OM leaders who agreed I could go to India. After leaving his office which he locked behind him, I read my mom's letter and started feeling really bad. Since his office had the only phone in the building, I went downstairs and found the OM cook who had a key to the office so I could try to call my mother and talk to her about it. I did get through to her, so I went back to Herentals not knowing if I would be going to India or not. On Sunday I tried calling mom from Rien's home phone. I got through and told mom to call me back but I gave her the wrong phone number. After waiting for a while and realizing something was wrong I called her again and gave her the correct number. Those two calls cost BF 100 at the rate of BF 5 per 2.5 seconds. It was much cheaper for mom to call me. My first explanation was that she knew I was a practical kind of person and thought Bible school was not the right thing for me as I always learned better from experience. She told me that she had raised me to make my own decisions so whatever I decided would be good. I told her I did not want her to think that I was running away after the horrible way I had treated her for so many years. She told me that all of that was in the

past, and she did not remember it and neither should I. We talked about my adopted grandmother being upset as she thought she would never see me again. I started to cry as things were getting very emotional. Then mom said that it would be very hard on her having me go, but she would work on it. That was the hardest phone call I have ever made in my life, so much so that I cried for several minutes afterwards. A couple of days later after I returned to Herentals, I received a call from my church in Staunton saying that they were 100% behind me. After weeks of struggling with whether to go or not, now everything was falling into place quickly.

On of the final days together as a team I had a very strange meal of dark red horse meat, which tasted much like beef. I don't recall the circumstances behind this meal, but it was yet one more thing in my growing list of adventures. My next month was to be spent in Germany at the yearly conference before going to India for two years.

## 15. Germany to Greece

As I was writing letters home while waiting in the OM vehicle base in Zaventem just north of Brussels, I was volunteered by one of the OM leaders to take eight West German girls home. I made sandwiches for all of my passengers and was given GM 200 (German Marcs). The first time I saw the German money I considered it a work of art with the multiple color detailed engravings. I was told that several families along the way would take care of me and that was all I knew about my excursion. Our first stop was in Köln at the Belgium-German border, where I saw the famous Gothic Köln Cathedral twin towers in the distance. I had studied about that famous church in my art appreciation class as it was one of the largest churches in Europe. I was told we were five hours south of Hanover, which was my final drop off point. I was very tired so I let one of the German girls drive the Ford Transit to Hanover. We went about a kilometer on the autobahn, past our change over point, when a German police officer pulled us over. He wanted to warn her that she almost hit a motorcycle as she entered the autobahn. When he discovered that the vehicle was registered in Holland and she was German, he insisted this was quite illegal. All the girls got out and started talking to both police officers about why they should follow Jesus. He let us go without a warning, which was an amazing turn of events. Since there was no hope of my driving five hours without sleep and then all the way from Hanover back to Zaventem, I drove away from the police and then turned the vehicle back over to the same girl to drive again. I laid down in the seat in the very back of the Transit and entered a deep sleep. I woke up once when they stopped for petrol, but I fell back to sleep and awoke as we arrived at the Hanover train station. All but two of the girls got out as they were taking trains to their homes. For lunch, the two remaining girls went to the home of the girl who had driven us through Germany. It was the first German home I visited and we rested a while before my final drive. The final girl had to go home to a small town north of Osnabrück called Bramsche. After a two and a half hour drive we arrived at her home and a wonderful German meal was waiting for us. The brother of the girl who I dropped off showed me how to get back

to Brussels and led me by his car to get back onto the autobahn. Just as the OM leader had told me, the German families had really shown me great love even though they only knew me as the driver who brought their daughters home. The last home gave me plenty of food for my long drive back to Belgium as I left their home at 12:30 in the afternoon. A couple of times I had to pull over as driving directly into the sun made me very sleepy and it was a struggle to stay awake. I finally arrived back at the OM vehicle base at 6:30 p.m.

While resting before my next drive I met two of the first South Koreans to join OM. One of them told me about the followers of Jesus in Seoul at one of the largest churches in the world with 150,000 members. They both visited that church, but they regularly attended a small Baptist church with only 500 members. One of them told me that he had learned about OM when one of the OM ships visited South Korea and that he was now waiting to join the same ship in a couple of days. It was so interesting to me each time I talked to someone from a different country. Later on in my life this conversation would take on an even greater meaning.

My next driving task was to go with one of the OM mechanics to Mosbach, Germany to drive a truck full of literature. At the Belgium-Germany border it took us an hour to get through the border checkpoint. The guards were suspicious of me and we had to wait for a long time as they checked my passport to trace it for any criminal activity. I didn't think I looked suspicious, but we never found out why they thought so of me. This drive was very enjoyable as we got to see the southern German countryside. We crossed one of the tallest bridges in Germany near Frankfurt. The vineyards on the hills below us in the valley was amazing. The bridge over the Rhine River was very ornate and intriguing to me as it was not a typical bridge. As we drove along the autobahn we saw smoke clouds everywhere as the farmers were burning the hay after the harvest as it was the end of August. We saw a couple of nuclear power plants along the drive as well, but they could not compete with the grassy vine dressed rolling hills. Once we got off the autobahn and drove on the local road to Mosbach, it reminded me of the drives we used to make in rural

Virginia. For some reason I never got homesick that summer even though some places reminded me of home.

## **Leadership Conference**

The conference for those staying longer with OM for a year or more was held in Mosbach, Germany during August. The daily schedule was to be up at 6 a.m., catch the bus at 7 a.m., be at the conference all day long and back to our sleeping quarters by 10:30 p.m. with lights out at 11 p.m. On my first day I met two women from India, who on finding out that I was going to their home country, decided to teach me a few things about their country. They were both living in London at the time and had little interest in returning to India as they enjoyed their freedom in England. They did not speak highly of India but in no way did that deter my growing excitement in going to India. I had my interview with the OM leader in charge of the Eastward Bound program and it was decided that I was accepted to go to India as they wanted to make sure those who went were stable enough to handle it. I was not sure how they made that determination but I was elated that I passed the initial test.

During the conference I met people from even more countries like Australia, Portugal, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Sudan, Syria and West Indies. Every conversation was an international experience for me. My girlfriend's team leader for the summer was from Australia so I talked to him during the conference to find out how things went with his team. I learned how creative God was by listening to him describe the animals of Australia. He told me about how kangaroos were fierce fighters and were dangerous as they could kill humans with their front claws. He told me about Koala bears only eating leaves from a specific gum tree to get their water supply.

During the first weekend, we all went to Heidelberg to work with a local church that was having a series of public meetings. The church was near the famous Heidelberg castle and we passed out the leaflets in the extremely busy market during a big youth meeting the church arranged. The streets were full of people and we handed out the brochures to any one who would take them. There were many

international people visiting this famous town, so we got to talk to several people in English including some Americans – all of whom we invited to attend the youth meeting. One of the American families we met were from northern Virginia which was an interesting coincidence. Two young American girls, one from Texas and one from California, came up to us as they had no place to stay so we told them to come to the church to spend the night. We were shocked when we saw them come that evening. We even met three men from India who were looking for jobs in Germany and they really became excited when I told them I was going to India.

The conference meetings were meant to help each person understand the culture of the country where they would be living for the next year or more. I learned all about India from people who had been there. It was kind of discouraging hearing about possible illnesses and the impending cultural shock. We watched several movies during the week to help us understand what we would be facing. One was called “Cult Confusion” to help us know what it meant to be part of a cult and how to talk to those who were part of one. We watched “Guyana Tragedy” about the death of Jim Jones and the People's Temple cult. The film I liked the most was called “Peace Child” about missionaries who went into Africa and through a tribal custom taught them about who Jesus was.

During the second weekend we all went to Stuttgart, which was known as the Bible belt in Germany. We met many people who had previously been with OM. We attended a large Lutheran church on Sunday morning, but the church was nearly empty with only a couple of elderly people in attendance. On the day before we went to a youth meeting in the YMCA and it was jammed with people. Quite the transformation as the young people were willing to meet outside the church as the state church had bad connotations for them. One of the young people played a trumpet and had an extra one with him, so I volunteered to play with him, which was not something I ever thought would happen. On Sunday afternoon we attended the evangelical church which met at 2 p.m. All the members also belonged to the state Lutheran church of Germany so they had to meet in the afternoon so as not to conflict with the official morning church times.

They had their own new building which was jammed with mostly young people. For both weekends I was on a team with two girls from Spain (who spoke no English), one Malaysian fellow, one girl from Switzerland, one Englishman, two of us from USA and one German girl who spoke German, English and Spanish and translated between all of us!

## **Life in Germany**

After the conference was over those who had to wait a couple of weeks before going to their final destinations, found homes to visit in the mean time. It was arranged that I was to stay with a German man named Jans, who I had already met and had been in India for three years. Also staying with me at his house was Pradip, who was returning to India after many years in the USA and who I had first met in Akron, Ohio at the start of the summer. I was really looking forward to our time together so I could learn all about India from both of them. His house was in a very small Bavarian town near Memmingen called Grönenbach. After living in two different Belgium homes, I was really looking forward to seeing what it would be like to stay in a German home for a couple of weeks.

Our first task was to get Pradip a visa for Belgium since all the teams going to India left from Zaventem. We drove an hour straight east to München. We drove Jans' Citroën model car and quickly learned on the autobahn to stay in middle lane. We drove around 100 k.p.h. and several times fancy Mercedes flew by us as if we were sitting still. They came up so fast that I did not see them in the mirror and before I knew it they were gone past us. On the way into München we found a travel agent office where we asked directions to the Indian and Belgium consulates. We found them both easily and Pradip the required visas without any difficulties. While in München, we decided to see the 1972 Olympiad. The whole area was nearly empty so we looked around the famous stadium that held under 100,000 people. We looked in the gymnasium where the USA lost the controversial basketball game to the Russians which I recalled watching from my basement in Churchville many years before. There was a bicycle

racing track around the edge of the gym and was unbelievable that someone could ride a bicycle on such a steep incline. We then went by the swimming pool where Mark Spitz won his seven gold medals. Both the swimming pool and the ice hockey rink were open to the public for DM 3 for daily use. It was hard to believe I had seen these buildings on TV man years before and was now seeing them in person.

Since we had extra time, we decided to see the Dachau Nazi concentration camp used in WWII which was the first such prison in Germany. Jans suggested that we go since he said it would radically change our perspective on life and that it did. It is one thing reading about the these camps and quite another to see one in person. At the front of the concentration camp was a museum full of original and quite graphic photographs. Some pictures showed the prisoners standing outside in the cold snow barely clothed, some of them as they committed suicide, some of them being medically tested by SS doctors (to see their capacity for freezing water or high pressure), some being executed by firing squads, some being hung on high metal hooks, some being incinerated or fumigated. I got a real sense of the horrible torture that occurred at the very location where we were standing and it definitely made us both feel sick to our stomachs.

The camp was huge as it held 27,000 people at maximum capacity. Everyone had to work each day from 4 a.m. to 9 p.m. After looking at the bone chilling photos and reading information about the camp, we started looking around the camp itself. They had reconstructed one building that was used by 400 men for sleeping quarters. The bunks were just high enough that one could slip into the bunk sideways and not hit your head. The bathrooms had large round sinks in the middle and the toilets were just porcelain holes in the floor. We then went outside and saw the enclosed area used by firing squads. Outside all the barracks were ten foot high concrete poles with sharp metal hooks on the top where they hung the prisoners to punish them. We then took a tour through the fumigation rooms that looked like showers with holes in the ceiling, where instead of water coming from the holes, poisonous gas poured out killing everyone in the room. In the adjacent room was where the bodies were thrown before being cremated. Those prisoners who entered the gas chambers had to clean

out the dead bodies first before they were killed in the same way. It was a very emotional experience seeing what evil men did when left to their own horrible devices. It was an eery feeling knowing my fellow human beings did that to one another.

For our first Sunday in Germany, we attended a small local church group with Jans. In the afternoon we all went for a picnic in the countryside. It was a beautiful forest with steep hills and grassy hilltop plateaus. At the bottom of the hill were many lakes visible in the distance with a large river flowing through the valley below. Most of the fields were full of clover, but we found a mowed field for an impromptu soccer match, which I had come to enjoy the more I learned it. Jans, Pradip, and I along with Roger, our new German friend, went to see a Catholic church nearby in Maria Steinbach. As in most old towns the church was in the center of the town and this one was freshly painted in a dark yellow color and looked quite plain on the outside. When we went inside it was the most amazing church I had seen to date. The ceiling was totally covered with mosaic paintings of the Virgin Mary, one of which had her in the clouds with a dagger over her right shoulder. We wondered what the significance of that dagger meant. The whole inside looked like it was covered in gold. Up front near the altar was a huge crucifix with Jesus hanging on it. We just stood and tried to take it all in. I recalled the plain simple wooden cross at the front of the church of my youth and compared it to this cross. The empty crosses in Protestant churches were very different from the elaborate Catholic crucifixes that had Jesus still suffering on the cross. Upon leaving the church and driving through the small village, we saw burning candles and crucifixes in the windows of every house. There were many small buildings with paintings of Mary and other saints in each one of the them. Pradip commented that they reminded him of the small Hindu temples all over northern India.

During the times that Pradip, Jans and I talked together we had the greatest time. Jans would recall his days in India to help me understand what I was soon to experience. He told me about using water instead of toilet paper to clean myself after going to the bathroom. He mentioned how a pond in the village provided water for

drinking, cleaning dishes and for going to the bathroom. He told of driving over the speed bumps too fast and the frequent pot holes. I saw an adventure in every story, but Pradip heard things that brought back horrible memories and made him not want to return to India. I got more excited every time we talked and Pradip got more depressed. It was the best of times for me and the worst of times for Pradip. I look back on those times fondly!

During the week, Roger took Pradip and I on a day trip to Füssen, which was on the Germany-Austria border. It was raining the whole day, but we decided to go anyway as the number of days we had left in Germany were coming to a close. First off, we went to see Hohenschwangau Castle as it was on the nearby lake. Even though the sky was dark and it was raining, still the scenery was amazing as the snow covered Alps in the distance. It was the first castle I ever toured and I marveled at every thing I saw. Each room in the castle was totally different from every other room and most of them had highly crafted gold and silver statues with paintings drawn right on the walls themselves. Ceramic stoves were in each room which kept them warm so that we never got cold inside the castle. On the next hill over was Neuschwanstein Castle, which was used as a model for the Disneyland castle. We walked up the steep hill road for twenty minutes to see the castle up close. We decided to skip the interior castle tour and took a hike down a small trail behind the castle which led up into the mountains. The view of the dark green lake below was amazing as the clouds hung low over the lake. We continued walking until we reached a very high bridge under which we could see a splendid water fall that fed the lake below.

We then decided we wanted to see Alps from a better vantage point, so we drove down the road for a few miles until we reached the entrance to the Tegelberg ski resort. There was a cable car at the bottom that cost DM 8.5 for a quick ride to the top of the mountain. Riding up was awesome as we saw the plains to the North full of lakes with the mountains rising sharply to the South, which was the direction we were going in. As we got closer to the top I saw the two castles we had visited coming into view and the snow capped Alps all around us, with the snow dusted evergreen trees all around us. Then we saw the

snow line on the mountain and it began to snow on us as we reached the top. We had not dressed for such cold weather, but we decided to brave the wind and go to the very top where we saw a cross had been mounted at the very crest. I was trying to enjoy the freezing weather as I thought this would be the last snow I would see for a long time. Once at the very top, I saw crosses on all the nearby peaks and to the South were snowy mountain peaks as far as I could see. It was absolutely breathtaking to see this in person. I wondered how anyone could see such beauty and not think of the God who created it. Roger said that people look at the object and praise the beauty and yet never look beyond them to creator. I then asked why God needed to make heaven as this was so heavenly. Roger said that the answer was on the other side of the mountain where the cities and sinful people lived. I felt like staying up on the mountain forever, but we saw a storm coming through the pass in the mountains near the castles and decided it was time to go down the mountain.

We wanted to walk down the mountain to get a feel for the advanced ski course and to get some exercise. It was scary walking down the very steep slope and I could not imagine someone skiing down. Somehow we got separated from Pradip and ended up walking down by the longest way possible but I had a wonderful time talking to Roger. By the time we reached the bottom, the storm had passed and the sun came out and we saw the snowed capped mountains all around us. I never ever thought I would see such wonderful sights when I joined OM at the start of the summer. It was sad telling Roger goodbye as I realized I would not see him again. I recalled the close friends I developed that summer who did not even speak English as a first language and yet we had a strong common bond as followers of Jesus. I was sad to leave Jans and his family as the two weeks I stayed with them was beyond anything I could have ever imagined.

## **Trip to India**

Once back in Zaventem, Belgium I was assigned to help get the vehicles ready for the overland trip to India. I was definitely not a mechanic but I was assigned to help a German mechanic friend of

Jans, named Hidde, rebuild some of the engines. OM had old vehicles which were rebuilt and then sent to India along with mechanics to take care of them. Hidde had himself been to India, so we had a great time talking while I obediently did everything he told me to do. On October 23, 1980, I left for India in a group of people in a thirty foot truck (similar to a large rental moving truck) and a Ford Transit. We passed through Germany and at the Austria border one of the women from West Indies was thought to be an illegal immigrant so we had to wait at the border while they checked her passport and verified her visa. Then our problems began as we entered Austria.

As I was driving the Transit through a mountain pass, the OM truck passed me since I was going so slow. I shifted from third to second gear to try to pick up speed as the road was getting steeper and steeper. The Transit stuttered violently and as I put in the clutch, the Transit came to an abrupt stop right in the middle of the road. I was not amused in any way at what was happening, especially since the truck had just passed us and the mechanics were all in that vehicle. I tried starting the Transit again and put it in first gear and was able to drive about 100 yards before it did the very same thing again and shut off. Since it was in the middle of the night I somehow pulled off the road and got out to wait for the truck to return. As I looked around in the moonlight, I saw a lake surrounded by the snow covered Alps and it was a wonderful sight but was the only good thing in that moment. Everyone else in the Transit was asleep so after 45 minutes, the truck returned and Derek, one of the three mechanics, jumped out and tried to drive it to the top of the hill. He finally gave up and from 11 p.m. until 4 a.m. he worked on the Transit while I handed him the tools he needed. When it started raining we were all tired so we gave up and went to sleep.

Around 7 a.m. the head mechanic towed the Transit behind the truck until it was under an overpass so it was possible to work on the Transit in the rain. He determined that the gear shifter was destroyed and replaced with it with an extra part he had in the truck. When he double checked the gear box he found four teeth on second gear had been knocked off, so I immediately thought somehow I forced the gear changing a little too hard! Since we lost the whole night to Transit

problems, we now drove through Austria in the day light. We drove right through a valley between two snow covered mountain ranges in the middle of the Alps. It was strange to see evergreen trees, which had changed from green to yellow, mixed with the red and orange hardwood trees on the lower parts of the mountains and then the snow covered tops. At the time it was the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

Just as we drove out of the valley the truck broke down. Wayne, the head mechanic worked on it for two hours until it was running again. Since it was night time and all the drivers were very tired, we decided to locate some local missionaries in Leoben. So far we had traveled through Frankfurt, Mannheim, Nürnberg, Regensburg in Germany and entered Austria near Weis. It should have taken us around six hours but we had taken two days. The family we located lived in a very small picturesque town, and had a son who was a mechanic and had worked with OM in Zaventem that summer. He helped Wayne fix the truck so we got back onto the road and headed towards India. During this time I read the biography of Sadhu Sundar Singh, which only made me want to get to India sooner. I wondered when I got to India, if I would ever meet someone who knew him one day.

Once out of the beautiful Austrian Alps, we entered communist ruled Yugoslavia, which was a complete change of scenery in many ways. The houses were all very simple and mostly made of cinder block. We started seeing ox carts being driven on the road. Many people were either on bicycles or were walking on the road. When we went through towns, the road was lined with one continuous wall on both sides. As I looked out the window I saw the hard labor process of harvesting corn, all being done by hand. Some were picking ears of corn by hand, some were using hand sickles to cut the corn stalks, some were loading corn onto the ox carts, and others were stacking up the stalks into piles.

After driving for nine hours through small towns, we entered the rocky mountains in the southern part where the river below was visible from the road. We started seeing Greek on the signs as we exited the

mountains. The only sign of vegetation was small brown shrubs. Once in Greece it looked like more of the same and the mountains became hills. I wanted to stay awake to see what Greece looked like but I was so tired that I fell asleep. There were twelve of us in the back of the truck sleeping on the suitcases, so it was very cramped. I was able to stretch out and was thankful for a good sleep. I left my two new dark brown American Tourister suitcases with Jans and took his aluminum metal trunk which he used when he was in India. He told me it was perfect as no one would be tempted to take it from me. I did not sleep on my metal case as that would not have been very relaxing at all.

In Athens we all stayed in a student youth hostel. It was quite a change for us as there was no separation of male and female living quarters and a common shared bathroom. Many of the residents were on their way to India and were classic hippie types. They did not care at all about their hygiene and used illegal drugs. It was shocking for us all to be around such foreigners going to same place as we were but with completely different motives. We took a day to see the Parthenon as it was visible up on the hill from most of the places in Athens. When up on the hill we saw all of Athens below, which at the time contained half of the population of Greece. We also visited Mars Hill on the way down from the Parthenon as it was the place where the Apostle Paul preached in the New Testament. It was a strange feeling seeing such ancient ruins, after having lived in Virginia where I thought a hundred fifty year old house was ancient.

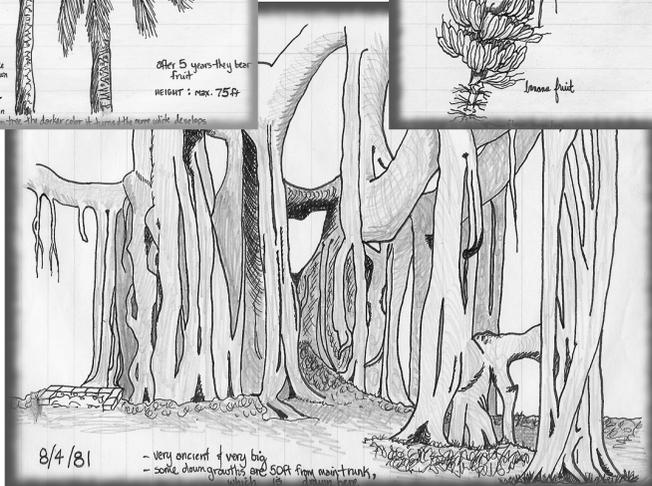
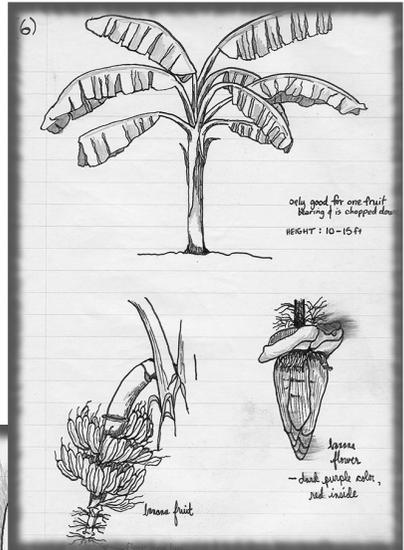
On October 31 at 8:30 a.m. I boarded an Egyptian airplane on my way to India. Since Iran was closed to Americans at the time, I was the official escort for the nine girls traveling to India. They also were from countries that could not travel through Iran. Our first stop was Cairo, Egypt. It was odd to see soldiers carrying automatic weapons in the airport and that was our first reminder that we were in a foreign land. We waited five hours in the Cairo airport for our next plane. After taking off we saw the pyramids in the distance which was fascinating. Our next stop was Bahrain. All I saw was yellow colored sand below us during the whole flight from Egypt. As we were landing I saw roads covered partially with sand and every where I looked was sand. When I started to get off the plane, the girls who I was supposed to be taking

care, told me to sit back down as this was only a layover. As I turned around to sit down I saw for the first time an Arab man in person. He was totally covered in white with a black and white head dressing. His wife was right behind him and was totally covered in black from head to toe. It made me realize how far I had come and wondered why that man from my tiny hometown had come to live in neighboring Saudi Arabia.

Our next stop was in Karachi, Pakistan. After we rode the bus from the plane to the terminal, the girls were approached by an airline official saying he had a hotel room for them to stay in. They directed him to me and he told me he arranged for us to take the 4 p.m. flight that day instead of having to wait for the 6 p.m. flight the next day. Since he was an airport official, I fully expected this to be his job to help me free of charge. He got our boarding passes and took care of our luggage. Another airport official showed us where to wait before going through the baggage security checks. When we got to the waiting area, the first official who approached me came up and started talking, but I had no idea what he was saying as it was in English but sounded like a foreign language to me. That is when I found out he wanted money since we had excessive luggage. I had no idea what to do, but I did not want anything bad to happen so I paid him DM 100 (which was around \$50). At the time I did not know whether it was a bribe or required fee for the baggage, but looking back it seems obvious that I made a mistake in giving him money. We waited four hours in the waiting area for our Air India plane to be ready for us to board and I was almost in India!

# Section Five

## Indian Subcontinent



## 16. Arrival in Bombay

When my Air India flight arrived in Bombay I was only twenty years old, but within a couple of weeks I turned twenty-one. I was really hoping for a huge change in my life that every one had told me would happen, but I had no clue how the change would come. At the time I was too tired to care about much of anything as our plane landed around midnight. The customs line was very long as it seemed like all the airplanes landed at the same time in the night. I was singled out for a luggage inspection and since I had a cassette radio clock in my possession, the customs official made a note in my passport so if I left the country it had to be with me. I had no idea why this was important at the time, but was told later that it might be a problem for me in the future. There was an Indian man from the OM Bombay office who came to help arrange taxis for us, so we did not have to fight our first battle by ourselves. None of the taxis wanted to take us since we had too much luggage. Finally our Indian helper found a police officer to forcefully encourage the taxi drivers to take us. All the drivers that took us had to sign a form at the airport customs exit post which contained our names and passport numbers. We were told that this was required as they had recent taxi kidnappings from the airport. That was not a good feeling for my first step onto Indian soil. Our Sikh driver drove extremely fast without his headlights on. He seemed angry that he was forced to take us. I talked to him about driving in the dark and he told me it saved his battery by not turning on his lights. Right after this he turned a sharp corner and got a flat tire. He pulled over next to a tall windowless office building in the process of being constructed. He ordered me to watch the luggage as he took it all out of the trunk and set it along the road, so he could get to the jack and spare tire. As I looked around I saw poor people sleeping on the sidewalks in all directions on both sides of the road. It made such an impression on me that I can still clearly remember that scene to this day.

There were way too many people at the OM house in Nana Chowk off Grant Road, so I spend my first night in India sleeping on the floor, which would be my normal mode for sleeping for the next two years. In

the morning I took my first Indian bath with a cup and bucket of cool water. I also got to experience my first Indian toilet by cleaning with water instead of using toilet paper. Every new minute was an adventure for me! One of the first people I met was an Indian named Babu from Kerala. He sympathized with me as he came from a very wealthy South Indian family and was finding the adjustment difficult to such a simple lifestyle. He took me across the road to enjoy my first Indian snack with a cup of chai. We met a couple of times in different places in India over the next two years. Since the house was too crowded, I went with Pradip to his uncle's house. It was so encouraging to be with Pradip at his in-law's house for my first meal and to see an Indian home right after my arrival. They were so kind and loving to me that it gave me a great first impression of true Indian hospitality.

On my first Sunday in India, I went with Pradip on a sightseeing trip in Bombay by train, bus and taxi. We attended a large Baptist church that stuck me as being similar in style to what we had in USA, which I was not expecting. Upon leaving the church I went in the wrong direction instead of following Pradip and I got soaked with muddy water as a taxi hit a big mud puddle next to where I was standing. It seemed like everywhere we went beggars wanted to touch my white skin and to collect money from me, even though I did not look very presentable with my mud stained clothes. The sun was bright and hot so it did not take them long to dry out. In the afternoon we visited Pradip's cousins who lived near the beach and they were making lanterns for an upcoming Hindu festival.

As we walked on the beach I marveled at how dirty the sand was on the beach. It was surprising to see coconut trees for the first time. There were animals all over the beach as monkeys were used by beggars to solicit money, and camels and horses were being used by white skinned tourists. I had no interest in being a tourist and avoided that part of the beach. We walked on the beach for a long time and came upon a Hare Krishna temple right on the sand. Immediately outside the temple was an American who told us he had been in India for ten years. We politely listened to him ramble on and on about animals having God consciousness and other things, but I could not figure out what he was trying to get across. He was the last person

I wanted to see as I wanted to meet Indians and experience India not some white person pretending to be an Indian.

Pradip helped me that day in my quest to learn about India as he gave me a Lassi to drink, many cups of chai, chili covered eggs with curry and rice. It was the best thing that I could have asked for, to be with an Indian friend at the beginning to show me his country. For dessert we had paan where we took turns spitting the red juice on the ground. We were in no way alone in this task as I saw the red stains all over the road around the paan keepers stall. What ever Pradip ate and drank I did the same as I just wanted to fit in and become an Indian like him. It also wanted to have his brown skin to avoid the constant beggars, who were like magnets on my pale skin.

I was kind of shocked that I was not more affected by the poverty at first. I had seen some poverty in the Bronx, but nothing of this magnitude or extreme. After seeing the most elaborate train stations and some of the other tourist sites like the Gateway to India, my weekend of relaxing ended quickly. Before leaving Bombay I was taken for the customary lungi shopping, as I was told it was need for taking baths in public places. There were so many colors and patterns to pick from so I had a hard time deciding. Finally the man who took me just picked one for me, which was a dark green plaid with brown lines running through it. Back at my temporary OM base, he taught me how to tie it so it didn't fall off, which seemed important to know. During that shopping event I bought the standard white and blue Indian Bata chappals, which were my sandals for bathing. I was also shown the correct method for washing my own clothes with blue Rin soap, which was to be done when I was bathing. It was a simple procedure. The blue soap made it clear when the soap was on the wet clothes. I pushed the clothes back and forth on the cement floor to get the soap into the clothing until bubbles formed. After a couple of minutes per article, I then hand wrung the water out and put them in the gallon sized bucket until no soap was present in the bucket. There was a line of rope to hang my clothes in the bathroom and they dried in the Bombay air before morning.

## First long train ride

My first long distance train ride was from Bombay to Ahmedabad, Gujarat and I left at 8 a.m. and arrived at 9 p.m. the same day. I was not sent by train by myself as I had a traveling companion named Leonard, who was from Singapore and he had traveled with me all the way from Belgium. On this trip I discovered many wonderful traits of Indians as I enjoyed every minute of this journey. I saw several examples of their generosity that day as I rode in the second class compartment. The eight people in my part of the open compartment were always buying fruit, ground nuts (peanuts) or drinks. Instead of only buying for themselves, they offered it to every one else. I never saw anyone buy only for themselves during the whole day. They all looked poor from the state of their clothes, but they all had big hearts. They wanted me, as a stranger, to take first and they would not accept my rejections. They helped me buy food along the way as we stopped in train stations, but they made sure it was not too spicy for me. It was so interesting to see how everyone enjoyed traveling more than just longing for the end destination. They talked constantly and laughed together as they shared stories with each other all along the way.

There was only one man with us the whole way and every new person sitting down in our section was told all about us. He was especially quick to tell everyone that we were Christian missionaries and pointed to our Bibles which we had next to us. No one seemed to mind this comment at all and as people left our section, they all said how much they enjoyed meeting us and how it was a pleasure to talk to us on their journey. Some stops caused a flood of people to enter the trains. I saw a mass of people running down the station landing before the train stopped and they jumped into the train door to make sure they got on the train. There were no bars on the train windows, so people jumped in through the window after launching their luggage in the window before hand. During some stretches people were packed in the overhead luggage racks and standing in the aisles between our seats. After a couple of stops, the train became mostly empty again. The people came and went in waves.

When the train was not full, I looked out the window and viewed the Indian countryside. As we went through Bombay going north, I could not believe the awful poverty I saw along the railroad tracks throughout Bombay. It seemed like the poor people lived right next to the loud train tracks and make their huts from sticks and rags. Their huts were black from the dirt and smoke of being so close to the trains. Once out in the country I saw a huge lake with poor people living all around the edge of the lake. Later I saw the Western Ghats which were a welcome sight, but odd to me in that there were no trees on the mountains at all. Along the way we saw a train wreck that happened several days before, and someone told us that one hundred people had died in that wreck. By the middle of the train trip, I finally learned that it was the custom to refuse politely when first asked to take something and then after being asked a second time, it was acceptable to take it. The custom of polite persuasion at it's finest.

Some interesting topics of conversation came up during that trip. When anyone found out I was from America, they wanted to know what I thought about the presidential election that week. They wanted to talk politics, but that was something I had no interest in at all in doing. One person asked me how much my shirt and blue jeans cost that I was wearing. When I told them the rupee equivalent was 14 RS for my shirt and 100 RS for my jeans, everyone who heard was amazed. When I told them I grew up on a farm, they all agreed that I must be a very rich farmer. Of course I had to deny that I was rich, but I realized that compared to everyone around me, I really was quite wealthy.

At another time when the train was not very crowded, a poor Hindu family came in our section and sat down across from us. The parents looked very young and they had a cute little girl with them. They brought their food with them and they both helped feed the girl first. After she was all done eating and drinking, then the man ate. When he was done the woman ate what was left. Not only was that strange to me, but I had never witnessed a woman being so submissive to her husband and taking care of her family before herself. The whole way they were on the train next to us, she was serving both her husband and her daughter. The lessons were just beginning, but I liked what I saw so far.

Besides the crowds and people staring at me, there was only one thing that bothered me on the train. I was not expecting what I found when I went to the toilet. The room was big enough, unlike a tiny airplane bathroom, but the stainless steel floor with a hole with the train tracks visible below was a bit odd. It made me even more sympathetic for those who lived near the train tracks. Since the train was constantly shifting, I found it challenging to keep my feet on the metal pedestals. Then I had to wash myself and not get my jeans soaking wet, but at least they had a faucet with small plastic cup near the hole in the floor. I thought I had learned the proper technique, but in a moving train it was quite a different thing altogether. I only partially got my pants wet, which was embarrassing to me but no one else seemed to notice. There was a tiny bit of soap on the wash basin so thankfully I had a way to wash my left hand before returning to my seat.

## 17. Gujarat

My first venture from Ahmedabad was traveling by a local train to the western part of Gujarat in the Surendranagar district. The purpose of our visit was to take books to the Disa Christian Convention. I had no idea what to expect during our visit, but my first task was to load up eight suitcases with as many books as possible from the OM base. It did seem a bit strange to me at first how we would move these large suitcases between the three of us who were going to Disa. We took a couple of auto rickshaws to the train station and arrived there at 7 a.m. as we needed time to buy tickets and to get our suitcases positioned to jump on the 8:30 a.m. train. The train was over an hour late and when we saw the train we knew there was no hope. The whole train was completely full inside and every car had people riding on top with no room anywhere. We waited for the next train, which arrived at 11 a.m. and unbelievably was even more crowded. I thought there was no way any more people could be on a train when I saw the first one, but this one had people jammed inside so tight there was no way to even move and the top was jammed also. I thought it would be fun to ride on top of a train as it seemed dangerous, but it was out of the question with our heavy book suitcases. We did not have much money with us, so we ate the chapattis we brought with us and got a couple cups of chai during our stay in the station. We waited all day long but every train was full, so we had no alternative but to wait for the 4:30 a.m. train the next morning. We slept in the train station on top of the suitcases that night, to make sure no one stole them from us while we slept.

The early morning train was nearly empty when we got on it, so that was a great relief. I jumped up into one of the luggage racks to sleep as that way I would not be jostled around as people got into the train along the way. Since we got on a local train it stopped at every station between Ahmedabad and Palanpur, but I slept most of the way since I was very tired. I woke up at each station to the sounds of vendors selling snacks and chai. With each stop the train became more crowded, but it did not affect me from my high perch in the luggage rack, which did not ever seem to be used for luggage at all but for

other who laid down to rest like I did. Before we reached Palanpur, we got off the train to meet someone who lived near the station for breakfast around 9 a.m. It was easy to get off as the train was not full. I stayed with the luggage at the train station, while the others ate and then they watched the luggage while I ate at this house. We easily got on the next train that came and we arrived at Palanpur at 11:30 a.m.

Our next challenge was taking a local bus to Disa, which meant we had to find a way to get the suitcases to the bus stand. Somehow Gideon, the Gujarati fellow with us, borrowed a bicycle. He saw his mother in the train station so we assumed this was his hometown, which explained how easily he came by the bicycle. We loaded a single piece of luggage onto the bicycle seat and walked the heavily loaded bicycle from the train station to the bus stand and then placed each piece of luggage on the top of the bus. I waited at the train station while the other two did this until the last luggage was moved. As I waited it did not take long for more than fifty Indians to crowd around staring at me. I had no idea what I should do as I felt like I was an animal at the zoo. It did not matter what I did, they just stood around and looked intently at my every move. When Gideon returned for the last luggage, he took out some books and I tried selling them to the people around me. They soon lost interest and just walked away once they found out the reason for me being there. It was quite the challenge in getting the heavy suitcases all the way to the top of the bus as the books were extremely heavy. I got about half way up the ladder on the back of the bus and as the luggage was handed to me I passed it onto our other traveling companion on the top of the bus. By the time we were done, the whole bus was full of people, so I stood during the whole hour long dry dusty trip to Disa.

## **Disa**

When we arrived at Disa we paid a fellow with a four wheel cart to haul our books to our final destination at the local church. The only other convention I had ever attended was a Christian beach concert in the spring at Myrtle Beach, so I really had no idea what to expect when we arrived. We were invited to sell books to the attendees. At

the church they had a large tarp covering the back and sides of the church with straw mats on the floor. They had a western looking podium up front for the speakers. It was very hot and dusty during the day. We were given tables to display our books for the event. There was room for fifty people under the tent structure. It was never completely full for the four day conference which lasted from Thursday through Sunday. The first thing that struck me as odd were the two men who spoke. They were both Pentecostals from Tamil Nadu in South India. They were just like the Pentecostal Holiness people I had come across in rural Virginia the year before. Once they got up front, they did not speak in normal tones but shouted every spoken word. They had no need for a microphone or sound equipment! Every day they wore blank dress pants and pressed white shirts like Christian uniforms. Quite different from the locals who mostly worn white dhotis instead of pants. One of the men spoke loudly in the Tamil language while the other then translated into Gujarati just as loudly. The only thing I remember is that they constantly used the word “stotrum” repeatedly at the end of every sentence. I was told it meant “Praise the LORD” in Tamil. I may have been half way around the world but I was witnessing western culture being mistakenly transferred as part of Christian behavior. Every one was so pleasant during the conference as they were happy to have my smiling white face around. They thankfully did not force me to speak up front as I stayed in the back by the book table the whole time.

The best thing about the conference for me was the food. It was extremely spicy unlike anything that had ever entered my mouth. Very simple potato and cauliflower curry was served with steaming white rice and oil bathed puris. So far, it was the best food that I had eaten in my two short weeks in India. The only problem was that my digestive system was not used to such extremely spicy food, so it was also the worst thing at the conference. It forced me to frequent the make shift toilet near the back of the church. I was really very weary of using it after seeing it the first time. It was really just four sheets of corrugated tin tied to four bamboo sticks. The problem was that the tin sheets were less than four feet high. At the bottom were two red bricks and a small rectangular metal box. Somehow I was supposed to hit that box

along with the water to clean myself without being seen. This toilet was never made for six foot tall foreigners but I had no other choice. I tried to wait for night time so no one could see me, but the hot spicy food gave me no other choice but to run to the toilet after every meal. It was my first serious lesson in humility. A poor fellow came to empty the small metal tray in the evening. That was so shocking for me to see. Not as disgusting as the wild pigs I saw for the first time. Sometime as I left the toilet they would sneak in afterwards and eat from the pan. I decided that from then on I would never eat pig meat again as it was the worst thing I had ever witnessed. I also saw nasty pink dogs for the first time as they walked around the road and nearby buildings. They were homeless vagabonds which were never considered as pets by anyone. Quite different from anything I ever saw as dogs were treated like part of the family in the USA.

The best thing happened on Friday night. After a full day of heat and dust, the eldest Gujarati man at the church offered to take me down the road to get a salt lassi. I had no hope of talking to him, but I could tell he really wanted me to go with him. After a mile walk on the side of the paved road to the nearest restaurant, which they call hotels in India, we both sat and enjoyed the cold yogurt and milk drinks topped with salt. A crowd formed to watch me as I drank. On the way back, he reached over to hold my hand. I had been told in our orientation in Germany that males hold hands in India as a sign of friendship. I definitely did not want to offend him as he had just bought me a wonderful drink, so we walked all the way back hand in hand. I definitely got the feeling that he really enjoyed the privilege of being able to take me for a drink. The unusual thing was that we never spoke a single word to each other the whole time. It was not the last time that I was humbled by such simple generosity I experienced all over India during my time there.

After the conference was over we went to Gideon's home, which was an hour from Disa. My stomach problems were getting worse with every day, so I really wondered how I would be able to make the hour bus ride as I was going to the toilet around six times a day. Somehow I made it to his house and then my stomach really started hurting so bad I felt like buckling over. To get my mind off myself, Gideon took

me to the local dam to see the lake. I could see the mountains in the distance which really looked like large boulders. Gideon's family lived on an Army base and his mother gave me yogurt to calm down my stomach. The night was amazing as I saw more stars than I thought existed in the sky as I had never seen so many even in rural Virginia. With love and care from Gideon's mother, I was able to leave in a couple of days to return to Ahmedabad, which was a real concern of mine seeing how bad my stomach cramps had become.

## **First team in India**

Soon afterwards I traveled by Ford Transit to my new team in Surendranagar. The team leader was an American from New Jersey, so it was a pleasant surprise to have another foreigner to help me get used to my new life in India. He had been in India for three years and seemed to have a great bond with the seven Indians on our team. I had been told in Germany that the symptoms of culture shock could set in at any time after arriving. Our daily routine was very different from what I had done in Belgium. We drove from village to village all day long. We went to the center of each village and opened up the back door on the Ford Transit and used our bullhorn speaker to draw people to us. Once they saw the white foreigners it did not take long for hundreds of people to surround the back of the vehicle. The children were so cute, as they were always the first to surround us. One of us either told a short Bible story or a something that happened in our life as followers of Jesus. I can still remember the first time I tried to do this. I read my Bible each morning and that day I had read about people a long time ago sacrificing animals to get right with God. I thought this was applicable as it seemed like people all over the world make mistakes and then want to make up for their shortcomings before God. Instead of striving to reach God, I told them that Jesus had come to earth to seek us and to be our sacrifice. He was still alive as he had helped me. I had no idea if the translated message was understood but it was an amazing feeling to me as I had just spoken to hundreds of people about what I believed in. We rotated the speaking so everyone on the team got a chance daily to take their turn. After the talk, we sold books and small packets to those around the vehicle. All but two of us

left the vehicle and visited the shops close by to see if any shop keeper or person visiting the shop wanted to buy books.

After my first week on my team, I started to be more reflective and introverted. Since I was living with my team members twenty-four hours a day, it did not take long to find faults in others or for them to see mine. I started realizing how much of a hypocrite I was at times when I did not get along with my teammates. I also wondered how terrible I must look before God as I needed many changes in my own life and yet I was trying to tell others about what Jesus had done in my own life. My introspection made me wonder if culture shock was setting in. I really enjoyed going into the villages as they were so much nicer than the large cities. There were always village people who wanted to buy the packets we sold for one rupee. A cup of chai tea was around the same price so it really was not expensive. One such village we visited was called Sayla where I sold books with a Gujarati teammate called Danesh. We sold books in the local bank. I found it hard to believe how many papers existed in that bank along the inside walls of the bank. Maybe even more unbelievable is how anyone could find something if asked to retrieve a paper. We then visited a huge house where a sadhu lived. As we entered the front gate we saw around thirty children all sitting on a platform listening to a teacher talk to them. One of the sadhu's main helpers bought a Bible from us. As we were leaving the village a Hindu swami approached us and wanted to talk. He told us he was God, but wanted to read some of our literature to learn more about what we were talking about. I was beginning to understand that I need to expect the unexpected each day.

On the second week I became twenty-one years old. That was an important age in the USA as many people my age longed to legally drink alcohol. For me I had absolutely no interest in such things as the thought of alcohol brought back very bad memories. My birthday was just like any other day in India for me. I spent time talking to a team member from Kerala named Mark. He told me he had a friend who had lost a lung to tuberculosis. He also knew someone who had gotten a disease that had moved into his spine and had paralyzed him. Mark himself had typhoid once and had lost consciousness for eighteen days. He had no food or water during that time. Just as he was getting

over this bout another month long episode incapacitated him again. An American missionary lived nearby and helped his mother and him during this time. He had decided to follow Jesus because of it, as did his whole family. Every one considered it a miracle that he lived through it. I was humbled to be talking to him as he had seen so much suffering which I had never experienced.

During this time we had a movie called “Yoneka” which we showed in a different village each night. We showed the film in a places like Hindu colonies, hospital colonies and churches. In India a colony was a part of a village or town where a group of people lived who had a common heritage or livelihood. For example, the hospital colony contained all the people who worked at the hospital who came to live there just to work at the hospital. The movie we showed was a true story about a Japanese girl whose mother died and it affected her greatly. She took it so hard that she tried to commit suicide and jumped in front on an oncoming train. Somehow she was not killed but lost her left arm, left leg and two fingers on her right hand. She became a follower of Jesus as a result and at the end of the movie it showed her talking about the truth of the film. We had a large white sheet that we tied up between trees or buildings as a screen for our diesel powered movie projector. The movie was always a big hit with the children who crowded the front for the best view.

Our final day in Surendranagar was not the high point of my time in India. We stayed on a very old British missionary compound for the week. It was abandoned as there was only a single person living in the huge brick walled compound. There were several buildings inside the compound. A well was right in the middle of the compound where we washed our clothes and took our baths. The tube well was surrounded by a large circular concrete slab, which was perfect for all of us to wash and bath at the same time in our lungis of course. There was a descent size church building on the compound that we never saw anyone go near. On the last Sunday, the only man living in the compound grounds invited us to the church on Sunday morning. We thought we should go since he had allowed us to live on the compound for the week. We sat in the front two pews, but out of the fifty pews there were only three elderly women present besides us, who sat on the

other side of the church in the back. As he spoke, I asked why one of our Gujarati team members was not translating so I could understand what he was saying. He told me it was not worth me hearing. All he talked for an hour was finances and why the church members were not giving enough money. I also wondered why he did not have a Bible up front while he was speaking and my Gujarati friend told me that he was totally illiterate and in his old age of seventy had never learned to read. He was saying how he was not happy that he had to go from house to house visiting all the Christians in the town to collect 10% of their monthly income. It made me very sad to see the Indian Christians in such bad state that it had to come to this. It was not the last time that I was disappointed in those who called themselves Christians in north India.

## **Rajkot & Morvi**

The contrast was odd between what we saw in the villages with our final Sunday in Surendranagar with the loud Tamils in Disa. On our way to the town of Morvi, we visited several small out of the way villages. As we drove along the main road, we saw a village on a hill in the distance on a dirt road that had a camel and bullock carts with people going to a market. The only problem with these well traveled dirt roads was that vehicles almost never traveled on them. The bullock carts carved ruts in the sandy soil that did not match the Ford Transit wheel base. It was not the smoothest ride trying to navigate these ruts. Then we had a flat tire, which happened a couple of times every week.

Going down one of these roads for about three kilometers in the evening, we noticed the village had no electricity at all. As we got to the center of the village where the Hindu temple was located, we parked next to a huge ancient tree. When they saw our white faces, the people sitting around the edges of the raised temple walls told us that we were the first white people to ever enter their village. From the sound of us driving through the village word got out to follow us, so before we knew it the whole area around the temple was full of people sitting ready to hear what we had to say. They all sat so quietly and

listened to every word that was spoken. As we moved around to the shops near the temple all we saw were small oil lamps in each shop.

When we arrived to Rajkot that night, we stayed at a large mission school. That day was really odd as it drizzled a slow steady rain all day long. Every one told us that it never happened outside of the monsoon season, but no one was able to explain it. We were allowed to stay on the veranda next to the school classrooms, so we tied up our mosquito nets and laid down for a sleep around midnight as we were all tired after a very long day. The only problem was that hundreds of mosquitoes followed me under the net. I saw them resting on the inside of my net instead of the outside which was where they were supposed to be. I got very little sleep that night and when it became daylight I got up and saw mosquito bites all over my arms. After a cold shower, my bites felt slightly better, but all the team members said they had never seen so many mosquitoes anywhere in India in their travels. I was glad when we left Rajkot for Morvi that day.

I don't know if it was the mosquito bites or the fact that I was very tired, but I began to have problems with some of my team members at this time. The only safe place was to be around my fellow American team leader, but I knew that was not the right thing to do. Some of the Indians asked me to share my toothpaste or shampoo or soap with them, but it was hard for me to do so. I thought about the two years I was to be in India and there was no way my simple possessions could last that long but I wanted to use every bit of them myself before they ran out. They were the only American items I had with me and I knew they could not be replaced. All of my big words about forsaking every thing while in India were mere words as it was hard for me to even share the little I had. In those days there was a ban on all foreign goods in India. It was shocking to me to have nothing I could relate to on a daily basis. The soft drinks were Thumbs Up and not Coke or Pepsi. The soap sold in shops had different scents than I was used to. The food was nothing like I had ever seen or tasted. I drove on the left side of the road, which I never had a problem with. The road markers were small stones labeled with Hindi numerals. There were no road signs telling me where to go so we had to stop and ask for directions constantly. The paved roads were in bad condition

with many pot holes and the random speed bump always caught me off guard, especially while driving at night. All of these things and more helped edge me into culture shock as I mistakenly started to think too much about myself and my own problems. I did remember how I frequently stayed up all night long doing projects while at Virginia Tech, but a single night without complete rest in India turned me into someone I did not want to become. I also realized how easy it was to read a book and feel like I understood how to live what it said, but a whole different thing to practice it in my life when in a state of shock. Maybe this is what they meant when they said I would never be the same after a short time in India.

On the positive side, our time in Morvi was amazing. We were told that a year before on August 11, 1979, a dam broke four kilometers away and had destroyed most of the city and surrounding villages. Some of the high caste Hindu leaders had not allowed the previous OM team to stay in Morvi ten days before the flood. It got worse as they stoned the team members and beat up the driver and forced them to leave the town in that condition. We had no way to verify that it was true or not, but the people we were staying with, said the team leader shouted as they were leaving that God would judge them for the way they molested his team members. The flood had killed over 10,000 people in only four hours of flooding. It made a good story, but I wondered if the two events were really related. We stayed in a hospital and it was the Hindu relief workers who told us these things.

We were the first OM team to come back into the town since that time. Even though it was still raining slightly, we sold two hundred Bibles that day, which was much more than we typically sold in a week. At times we could not get the books out as fast as people were requesting them. There was definitely something different about this place. At the same time, I saw something that I did not understand at all. We also saw responsiveness in the surrounding smaller villages. There was a Muslim festival going on and we saw two men rolling down the street. They were fully stretched out with their legs and arms extended and were very dirty from rolling over and over on the wet road. They were self inflicting pain on themselves out of their devotion

and had been doing so for a very long distance. I could not believe someone did this out of devotion, but it was one more thing that helped me understand I was not in Virginia any more.

As we moved around the various villages around Morvi, I assumed from eating food or drinking unclean water that it made me sick. I developed a running nose that just would not stop. I had no tissues as I had used my small pack when I was in Europe. It was time I learned the Indian way of doing without tissues, but I failed miserably and got stuff all over my pants. It was obvious that I could not learn every thing over night. Even worse I was running to the toilet over ten times a day and was starting to get weak from lack of fluids. I had a weakness that it was hard for me refuse anyone's kindness and I did not want to appear as better than the Indians on my team. This affected me in that I drank the same water and ate the same food as my Indian companions. At first it was fun being like them but then my stomach rebelled and reminded me that I was not an Indian after all.

The worse place for me were the hotels, as the Indians call restaurants, that had a large square tanks in the middle of them. These tanks were use by the small boys waiting on the tables to retrieve drinking water. If they were low then they would request someone to bring water from the outside and fill it. I clearly remember drinking water that was not clear but had tints of brown and green, depending on the hotel location. I thought I was being tough, but finally we went to a pharmacy and requested stomach medicine as I was getting weaker each day. When growing up I always had a mother to sympathize with me when I was sick and to take care of me, but now I was on my own and became grouchy and grumpy. It was too easy to complain and talk about how sick I was all the time. Somehow it had become an inner struggle for me in every thing I did and I was evaluating myself and finding I came up short. At the same time I had just finished reading the Psalms in my Bible for the first time. For me, it was emotional poetry of passion. Maybe it was because I felt sorry for myself or because I was sick, but nonetheless it helped me meditate on what God said in the Bible.

Another thing that was bothering me more with each passing day was people staring at me. When moving around villages from shop to shop selling books, I did not have large crowds following me, but there was always a few small children fascinated with my white skin who trailed behind me. I thought they were really cute for about a week and then it got old fast. It all came to a head when I was in Morvi as I ran out of clean clothes. The dusty dirt roads that existed in the surrounding villages had helped keep my clothes looking filthy as my sweat mixed with the dirt and clung to my clothes. I had only three pants and three shirts at the time. When I had no more clean clothes I had to wash them all including my underwear. The place where we were staying did not have a well pump, so I was forced to go outside along the road to a common area well pump and do my laundry there while in my lungi. A crowd quickly formed to watch me wash all of my clothes. It took me a couple of hours since I had just learned how to correctly wash them by hand and was definitely harder with people watching me do it. The more people that came, the closer they moved to me to get a view of the white boy washing his clothes by hand. This was not the only time this happened to me. One day I drove into downtown Morvi to get eggs and bread with my team leader. While he went into the shop to buy them I stayed in the Transit. Before I knew it the whole Transit was surrounded with curious eyes staring at me. It was a daily occurrence in my life in India for the next two years.

## 18. Parbhani, Maharashtra

The gray Ford Transit that I drove in Gujarat was needed by a team in Pakistan, so when my time in Surendranagar was over, I drove it to Delhi and then caught a twenty-four train to Bombay. I drove along with my team leader over 500 miles to Delhi most of which was through the wonderful state of Rajasthan. The hills were most unusual looking as there were no trees, just huge weathered maroon boulders. There was no state line announcing the border crossing but we knew we had entered Rajasthan when we got to Udaipur. The City Palace on the hill was amazing to see from afar, and it was visible for many miles as we drove through the city. On the way out of the city we saw the white Taj Lake Palace sitting in the middle of the blue lake. Sometimes the color of the water was deceiving as it looked blue because of the clear blue sky, but upon closer inspection we saw the water was filthy. After passing through Ajmer, we got to Jaipur to an even more amazing sight. We drove through the whole city and parked next to the Hawa Mahal for a lunch break. It was easy to fall in love with the pink city as it was the most exotic place I had seen. We slowly drove through the old city gates as we looked around in amazement at the beautiful craftsmanship. Upon leaving the city we saw the Jal Mahal in the middle of the lake and wondered how you could get to the palace on the lake as it looked half submersed. I was just thankful to have seen so many of the classic sites in the day light hours as we drove straight through by alternating driving duties. We stopped at small restaurants called dhabas along the way, which were common stops for Indian truck drivers. The potato paratha and chai was the tastiest I ever had. For the first time I saw what was under their Sikh turbans as most of the truck drivers we met were from the Punjab. They sat cross legged on the jute rope covered wooden cots as the hot food was served. When the dhaba was next to a lake or river, the Sardarji drivers removed their turbans and took a bath in their lungis. Then we saw their long flowing hair which for most of the truck drivers was way beyond their waist. I learned that they never cut their hair from birth nor were they allowed to cut their beards either. By the time we got to Haryana and then New Delhi, I was so tired

I was ready for the second class sleeping berth on the train to Bombay. I don't recall anything that happened during that long train ride except for the chai wallahs that came through at every train stop and the occasional peddlers hawking all kinds of stuff from peanuts to noisy stuff for children who kept waking me from my sleep.

My next train ride was from Bombay to Pune when I learned a valuable lesson of trust. One of the people who was supposed to go with me had to wait for a phone call, so I went on to the train station by myself. He told me he had a reservation on the 5:10 p.m. train. I was very apprehensive about going by myself and getting a ticket as I had not done so by myself yet. I started praying for God to help me as I felt powerless amongst the confusion of going by myself at the last minute. I had also experienced people taking advantage of me due to my white skin especially when I looked lost. I requested the auto-rickshaw driver to use his meter and he claimed the meter was broken. Once I got to my destination I was charged way to much, as I only found out later. It did not help much that I was over six foot tall and stood a head taller than most people in the train stations. All of these memories made me pray all the more.

I got to the station late as it was already 4:30 p.m. As I entered the train station, I asked for the Pune counter and it was right inside the main entrance door. There were very long lines of people waiting at all other counters, but the Pune line was fairly short. I had my small paper ticket in hand by 4:50 p.m. and went to locate the train. I learned from driving in Gujarat that it was essential to my survival in India to ask people for help. The problem was that sometimes I did not always get the truth as it was not polite to admit ignorance. In getting directions it was necessary to ask multiple people the same questions and follow the consensus of the answers. Since I did not have much time, I was hoping to get the correct answer the first time.

The reservation office closed just as I got there, so the station manager suggested I try to find an open berth by walking the length of the train. At the far end of the train, a man on the train motioned to me to come to him in the Indian way with the palm of his hand moving downwards. It was opposite to the motion we use in USA which was a

bit strange for me to get used to. He told me the whole train was by reservation only and that there was no way I could get on the train with only a ticket. Another rail official came up to me and told me that the train across the tracks was also going to Pune and for me to go try that train. I went over and found a seat in the second class unreserved car and sat down. I got a bad feeling about being on that train as I thought my traveling companion would miss the train, but I started praying for God to have mercy on me.

After the other double decked reserved train left the station, I looked at the windows to see if I could spot his white face in any car. I kept telling myself he had missed that train and somehow we would get together on this train. As I was thinking about this, I heard my name being called and in the window looking at me was Mike, my traveling partner! There was an empty unsaved seat right across from me, but it was the only empty seat I could see anywhere around me. It was a special lesson in trusting God to take care of me even though I definitely did not deserve it.

My inconsiderate actions on the Gujarat team proved that I was coming up short. I knew I was not the most qualified person to be in India as I was too young and inexperienced, but somehow God had allowed me to be there and was continually having mercy on me and taking care of me. I was beginning to see what India had done to me in my first month within her borders. I left Virginia Tech thinking I was a perfect follower of Jesus but after just a month I came to realize that I was sinful and in need of a savior.

## **Parbhani**

I resumed my driving duties of a different Ford Transit van, but this time I was the only foreigner on the team. My team members were Shanthkumar from Karnataka who was the team leader, Yudhisthir from West Bengal, Manesh from Bihar, Methuselah from Assam, Danny from Kerala, and fellows from Manipur and Maharashtra who unfortunately I fail to remember their names. We had a real united nations of India represented on our team. I had been praying that someone from West Bengal would be on my team as I knew that

I would be spending most of my time in that part of India over the next two years. Every person on our team spoke a different native language, but Yudhisthir, Manesh and Methuselah all spoke Bengali frequently. English was how we communicated; however, Yudhisthir did not really know English as he was trying to learn it. He became quite home sick and really had a hard time adjusting to the food and being outside of his Bengali culture for the first time. It was the common bond that brought us closer together and we are still friends to this very day.

I helped him learn English for the three months we were together. At the same time I learned about West Bengal since I knew that was my next destination after leaving Maharashtra. In looking at us together, no one would ever think we had anything in common. I had been to college and he had only a sixth grade education. I was over six feet tall and he was under five feet. I had very white skin and he had golden brown skin. I had a good sized trunk with all of my temporary belongings and he had a single small bag with contained all of his worldly possessions. There were two things we had in common; we both grew up on small farms and we both followed Jesus. Other than that, we had no reason to meet and become friends. I was with him on several teams while I was in India and have met him twice on return trips to India. Love through suffering is a very deep bond.

I would be a liar if I said that everything was wonderful on that team and we had no conflicts. Disagreements were bound to happen with so many people from different cultures living together for three months. I found out that even though there is a nationality called Indian, the people varied greatly from state to state. Besides the language barrier, most of us had real problems eating the red hot chili laden food that was served in the local hotels. We also had the personality conflicts that crossed culture divides. When I insisted I was right in opposing the team leader, both of us stubbornly refused to back down. I could say it was my young age, but it took years of marriage for me to realize I was not right all the time!

During the beginning of my time in Maharashtra the novelty of India finally wore off and the reality of the hard time ahead finally

sunk in. I was reading John Bunyan's "Pilgrim's Progress" at the time and it helped me realize that the book was just like my own life. The path of life for me was narrow, rocky and an uphill climb which was full of tests, but as long as I followed Jesus I was able to handle difficult situations. I slowly learned how to adapt to the Indian lifestyle not as an adventure, but as a way to show those around me that I appreciated their culture. I knew I would never become an Indian, but I wanted to try as hard as I could! At the same time I was reading Andrew Murray's "Humility" which helped me realize I had serious issues with my pride of my American culture. It illustrated how Jesus came to the earth not as a ruler but as a lowly servant, never considering himself better than others. I knew I had to quit being critical of others when I saw something I thought was wrong and instead encourage them, but it was much harder to do it.

The literature we sold during that time was typical of my whole time in India. Our hottest selling item was called a "Gospel Packet", which sold for 25 paise (equivalent to 3 US cents). The plastic bag held the Gospel of John and the Gospel of Luke from the Bible along with 10 four page small tracts on various subjects and 3 small booklets, one of which was 150 verses from the Bible. We also sold a book called "Great Bible Truths" along with which we gave a small Bible correspondence course book, all for the cost of 1 rupee 50 paise (13 US cents). All the material was printed in India and was in Marathi, the language of Maharashtra. When leaving a village we also threw out free single page tracts that published the local 24 hour radio station frequency to learn more about the Bible. We also had a few Hindi and Urdu books in case we came across someone who did not know Marathi as their first language.

The number of books we sold was barely enough to pay for our food and petrol for the vehicle. It was a constant struggle the whole time we were in Parbhani and we often wanted to go out into the villages, but did not have enough money for the fuel to do so. We entered every school we passed to see if the school principal would allow us to come in and talk to the children and either sell the cheap packets or hand out tracts. In most cases we were not given permission so we calmly thanked them for their time and moved on. One time

while we were in the small village of Hatta, we approached the Hindu school head master and he was very excited to see us. He took us around to every classroom and highly recommended that each student use part of their lunch money to buy the 25 paise packets. After we visited every class, he decided to bring all the students out on the school grounds for a special meeting. We sang Hindi songs for them and told them about the Prodigal Son story that Jesus told. Afterwards half of them came up to buy the packets. It was an amazing thing to watch as it had nothing to do with our great words as the principal did most of the book selling for us.

During one of our book selling adventures in the middle of Parbhani town, I was speaking behind our Ford Transit when a group of five Iranian students approached me. They waited patiently and listened to my every word until I finished speaking. Then one of them came up to me and said he wanted to talk to me about why I was doing this. All five of them took me into the hotel behind the Transit for a conversation over chai. I learned they all attended Parbhani Agriculture College, which made Parbhani famous as far away as Iran. They were all extremely attentive to everything I said. None of them really liked India at all, but the alternative of being in Iran and having to serve in the military was much worse, so they all put up with being there. They could not believe I freely chose to live in India like I did. We had several conversations over the three months I stayed in Parbhani. I traveled to the college to talk to them in their dormitory sometimes. I have no idea if they ever really understood why I was there, but I liked being around them as they listened to every attentively. In addition, they were foreigners in a strange land so we had that in common. I tried not to leave my team members too often in the evenings as I did not want them to think I was avoiding them to spend time with someone I was more comfortable being around.

Our only contact when we first arrived in Parbhani was a man from South India named Taru. He was not married and was fluent in Marathi so he came with us every time to be a translator. He had the smallest living quarters I had seen. It was around fifteen feet by ten feet with a small bed and a kitchen. The kitchen was separated by a three foot wall with a kerosene burner on the floor used for cooking.

We sometimes went to his room to drink his special blend of chai and to talk to him. It was very crowded if we all tried to be inside at the same time. I was not able to stand outside his room as a crowd quickly formed so I was respectfully given a seat on his bed. He had a small set of shelves which were built into the concrete wall that contained all of his belongs. He was getting married soon after we left, but was going to continue living in this small room.

We attended his evening meetings held in different homes. One family was very well off and had a veranda with a tube well in the middle of their large home and plenty of seating room. One time he served home made ice cream that was made just for us, which was the only time I had ice cream in India. There were local street vendors selling watered down milk in ice, but everyone I knew got sick when they had it, so it held no appeal for me. Most of the other families we visited lived in the hospital colony outside the town. We visited them at least once a week in the evening to sing songs and then one of us talked about what we were learning from the Bible. After a couple of months of these meetings, Taru approached me with a marriage proposal from one of the women who worked at the hospital. It certainly was flattering and I had no idea what to say at first as she was present with some of her girl friends at the time. It was hard for me to tell if they were serious or just wanted to see what I would say. After gathering my emotions I had to say that it was not appropriate as I had just gotten to India! Not really the best answer but somehow it worked as I never heard about the marriage arrangement again.

We found a brand new Brahman colony far outside the town limits where the residents allowed us to stay in one of the unfinished buildings. We asked people we saw if they approved our stay and they agreed on the condition that we used the house at the far end where a tube water well had been reserved for non-Brahmans. We had to promise never to go anywhere near the Brahman well. The houses did not have electricity so we depended on our hurricane kerosene lamps in the evening for reading and doing chores. The house we stayed in was really just a shell as the brick walls were finished along with the smoothed concrete floors, but that was it. All night long the guard came through the whole colony of thirty houses and banged his stick

and yelled out loud. It was hard for me to know if he was trying to scare people away or let everyone know he was doing his job. All he did for me was wake me up each time he came by. Thankfully he fell asleep most of the night by his campfire of cow dung.

A couple of odd things happened to me during my time in Parbhani. One time we were eating in a hotel in the middle of Parbhani during a time of a Hindu festival. We were sitting near the edge when we heard a very loud procession approaching. There was a band playing as they led the Hindu God through the town on their way to a local pond to bathe the idol. As a group of naga sadhus approached the hotel, the hotel owner suggested I move to the back of the hotel so I would be out of sight. He said the sadhus would not be happy if they saw me. He was scared they would hurt me or even worse damage his hotel. As the naked holy men passed the hotel they suddenly got really excited, like they could sense I was present, but that was my emotions getting the best of me. One of them had a live cobra snake wrapped around his neck and was dancing wildly. One of the other ones was covered with white dust and kept scanning back and forth like he was looking for something. I just wanted to disappear as I was very scared. Fortunately they never saw me and the whole procession passed after several minutes of loud commotion.

The other strange things happened to me more than once when we were in the villages surrounding Parbhani. As I entered the villages, the crowds all came to see us. When they saw the white foreigner they went to fetch someone from the village to be with me. In one village it was an albino man, who the crowd brought and made him stand next to me. They expected us to be able to speak to each other, but lost interest when we could not say a single word to each other. In another village they brought an insane woman to see me. She wandered around the village without a home and shouted meaningless things all the time. They wanted to see if I understood what she was saying.

In one village they brought a group of eunuchs to see me who were in town for a wedding. I frequently saw eunuchs in my travels in the villages of India and never really got used to them. They had their own caste in India and traced their heritage back to the times of the

Rajputs when the eunuchs were in charge of the ruler's harem. I always saw them in groups, sometimes as many as twenty at a time. They were at most village marriage celebrations as a way to bless the newlyweds. On the good side, one time as I walked by a small home where a marriage ceremony was taking place, those standing immediately outside the door escorted me inside to watch the wedding take place. I was told it was auspicious to have me present so they insisted I stay and watch the traditional Hindi ceremony. I was never bored in India. Every day was different and I could not predict what each day would hold. That was one of the great things about being in rural India.

My first Christmas outside the USA was fascinating. Taru had a big idea to rent the Parbhani meeting hall and have me as the special speaker. He had planned for it long before we arrived and carried through in reserving the auditorium for Christmas Day. It had seats for more than two hundred people and had a huge stage and high raised ceiling. He also rented a microphone with a small speaker. Our team was staying in one of the villages far away, so I drove back to Parbhani in the Ford Transit by myself. We went to the hall early that day and arranged everything. By the evening when I was supposed to speak, no one came. We had a banner on the building outside to let everyone know about the event and Taru ran an advertisement in the local paper as well. By the time I was to speak only a couple of people were present. It was very discouraging for Taru and myself as we had really hoped for many people to come. It was hard for Taru to be down for long as he was one of the most positive people I have ever met. The next day he completely forgot about the previous disappointing evening. He decided we should visit every family he knew and at each house they had special Christmas sweets waiting for us along with extra special chai. It is the only time I saw those cinnamon crescent shaped sweets. We did not eat a meal that day as we were completely full of tea and sweets from our friendly family visits.

As my time in Parbhani came to a close, I had to take a long drive to Aurangabad to pick up more literature. There was another team located in that famous city near the ancient Ajanta and Ellora caves. Along the way I picked up two other fellows for the long trip, one was a German fellow

named Klaus and the other was an Indian named Hridaya, which is the Sanskrit word for “heart”. They had known each other for the three years that Klaus had been in India and were dear friends. It was fascinating watching them interact as Klaus had white skin and was my height, but Hridaya treated him just like an Indian. They were trying to help each other memorize all four Gospels in the Bible that spoke about Jesus' life. They had a bond that was closer than brothers and something I had not yet seen during my four months in India.

We arrived in Aurangabad through one of the small city gates. The city was not as impressive as Jaipur, but it was obviously different from other parts of Maharashtra I had seen. When we reached the church where the Marathi books were kept, I met several other foreigners who I had not met before. As I was resting from the long drive, I heard one of the Canadian fellows cursing loudly at one of the young Indians present. He kept yelling all kinds of filthy words I had not heard for some time, but I was familiar with them as they once flowed freely from my mouth as well. After he calmed down I asked one of the Indians present if they knew what he was saying but he only recognized that none of them should ever be repeated outside the room! I asked another foreigner present about him and found out he played professional hockey in Canada and had a really rough family life. He came to India for a similar reason that I did, to do something good with his life for a change. I felt bad that I had so quickly judged him for his bad language and remembered it took me a while to get over my verbal profanity as well. The most amazing thing was how all the Indians loved him. They all knew he had a heart of gold and would do anything for them, but they also realized he vented from time and time and freely forgave him. It was yet another valuable lesson.

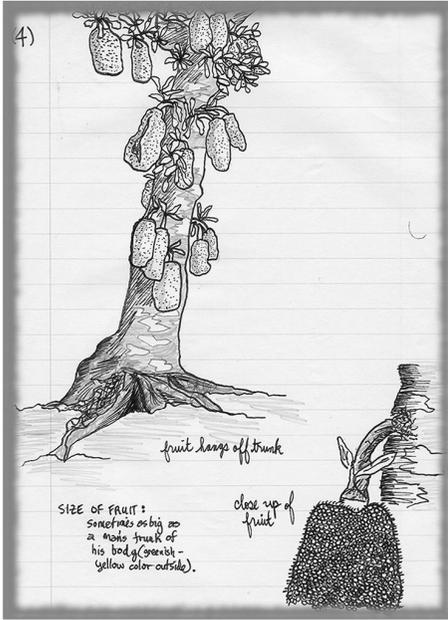
While in Aurangabad that evening, we went for a film showing in the Christian colony. I went with an Indian in an auto rickshaw along with the film projector and a large white canvas sheet which became our screen. As we got off the main road to take the side road into the colony, the driver told us to get out. We tried to pay him extra to take us all the way in the middle of the colony, but he refused. When we asked him repeatedly to explain his behavior. He told us that two taxi drivers had been recently murdered in the Christian colony and we

would not find any taxi driver to take us in. To me this was the worst news I had heard while in India. I had always thought Christians were supposed to be loving examples of Jesus on earth for others, but here they were known as the worst of the worst in Aurangabad. That could not be good at all. I saw many Christians who were born into Christian families and did not follow Jesus with their whole heart. It made me wonder why anyone would want to follow Christ with such bad examples of Christians. The film showing had the typical hundreds of people, with all the small children right up front next to the screen. To me as I looked out over the mass of people, I saw no difference between these Indians or any of the people in the Hindu villages where we showed the same film. I knew from the strict Brahmans we lived among that the name Christian was lower than the lowest caste, but I saw the same excited children watching the film regardless of their religion.

My time in Maharashtra came to a close when we all attended a week long seminar in the beautiful hill station in southern Maharashtra called Mahabaleshwar. On the way, I went with Klaus to see his sister at Osho center in Pune. His sister had fled his home in Germany and left everything to become a follower of Rajnesh. As we approached the huge marble building we did not know if she would come out to see us or not, but Klaus had to try since we were driving right through Pune. I waited in the Transit as I had no interest in talking to the orange clad white people pretending to be Hindus. Klaus tried for a long time to get his sister to come with us to Mahabaleshwar, but she refused. He was very disheartened by her strong refusal to leave. I felt sorry for him as I knew it had to make him feel really bad.

When we arrived at Mahabaleshwar, I marveled at the beautiful hills all around me. I had traveled along the Western Ghats by train to Gujarat and had seen them in the distance and had crossed them on the drive from Bombay to Pune, but they were much more beautiful being on top of them among the ancient trees looking across the wide reddish valley below. Also the temperature was much cooler at the top of the hills and that explained why white people in the past wanted to visit the hill stations to get away from the heat. I had a great time meeting some of the people who traveled with me overland from Belgium

including Pradip. We spend many hours reflecting on what had happened to us since our time in Germany. Since Pradip was from Gujarat I had to tell him all about my experiences in his home state and brag about the few Gujarati words I had learned along the way.



## 19. West Bengal

Before leaving Mahabaleshwar for the long haul to Kharagpur, I noticed that my skin was feeling very loose on my bones. At the same time as I worked on the vehicles I accidentally hit myself and became bruised immediately. It seemed like something was wrong with my body. I went to a local doctor and he diagnosed that I had scurvy. It made sense as I seriously neglected my body as I wanted so badly to become like the Indians around me and ate and drank whatever they did. An illustration of what led to this event is in order. I did not eat much fruit as my time was spent mostly in dry dusty conditions for the first four months in India. When I first arrived in Maharashtra and visited a small village outside Parbhani, I saw the nicest looking small heads of cabbage in the local market. It reminded me of home so I bought two small baseball size heads to eat while I waited for the others to come back. They looked so good that I ate them both and indeed the taste was just as I remembered. However, the next day I learned the difference between diarrhea and dysentery. The later always confused me as I thought it had something to do with sailors drinking too much salt water. I had no idea where I got that thought from but up to that day I had that impression. Similar to the fact that all I knew about India before leaving Virginia was that Indira Gandhi had something to do with India and there were multitudes of starving children, as that was my mother's favorite saying to get me to eat my food at night. After four months I was quickly educated on what India was really about and this was yet another case in the lessons of life. After the raw cabbages episode, I decided not to eat anything unless it was very well cooked, which included not eating any fruit.

I found the food so spicy in our part of Maharashtra, that most meals I cried continuously while eating. The food was bright red from the chili peppers added to the food. Unlike in Gujarat where they had the lovely custom of putting the super spicy green chili peppers on the side so they could be ignored instead of eaten with my food. In southern Maharashtra, it was not the case. The food was so hot that it overwhelmed my eyes, nose and tongue. I felt like my whole head was

on fire during the whole meal. Afterwards as I went to the toilet it burned all the way out as well. Looking back I wonder how I ate food like this, but I was young and just wanted to belong and be like the Indians with me. Just as I thought food could not possibly get any hotter, we visited a Railway Colony where most of the people were from Andhra Pradesh. As we visited these homes, they saw me and said they would not make the food as hot and spicy as normal. At first I thought this was a great thing as they were being so considerate of my white skin, but then as I ate the mutton curry, I found it was a whole level hotter than the Marathi food that I was just barely able to eat. It is without a doubt the hottest food that has ever entered my body. In some of the rail worker's homes, I just had to tell them that I was not feeling well and ate plain rice and yogurt mixed together.

On the drive to West Bengal, we went back through Pune, Nasik, Dhule, Akola and arrived in Nagpur. I had already driven to these places as there were other teams in these Maharashtra towns who needed literature and I helped drive the books to them at the very beginning of my time there. I visited Nagpur around Christmas time and it was the hottest place I had experienced so far. It was around 90 degrees and extremely hot and dry. That did not compare to how hot it was in April when we passed through. Because I was trying to recover from scurvy, I was told that eating fruit was the best way to recover. I learned that Nagpur was famous for its oranges and we all loaded up on the best ones I ever tasted. It was a wonderful to be forced to eat such fruit! On the drive we had two vehicles. One was the Ford Transit I had been driving for the three months around Parbhani and the other was a thirty foot truck affectionately called "XLY" after the license tag numbers. There were three of us fellows who drove the truck and two girls drove the Transit. All the Indians went by train from Pune, which certainly was not as much an adventure as we experienced.

We alternated driving duties and drove continuously without stopping. We stopped frequently at dhabas to get pipping hot chai to help wake us up. Every time we stopped the Sardarji truck drivers came over to talk to us about our truck. It was not the typical overloaded Indian truck with cargo piled up over the truck bed. Nor did it have the colorful paintings all over the outside as their vehicles

had. It had a simple red cabin which tilted forward to work on the engine and the plain metal container like box on the back. It really stood out as being very different from every other truck which stopped at the dhabas. It also helped that three white guys piled out of the cabin and sat on the jute beds waiting for food! No one felt good about letting the girls drive all the way across India alone, so we escorted them to Orissa to join their teams and to make sure their Transit did not break down along the way. We dropped them off at Bhubaneswar and kept going to Kharagpur as we passed though the state of Orissa.

On the night we arrived in West Bengal, after talking a cold bucket bath to freshen up, the leader at the base told us to go out to eat a special meal as a reward for having traveled safely across all of India. We typically ate simple food and never ate in fancy tourist style hotels, so this was a special treat for all of us. We went to eat at a Chinese restaurant, but I had never eaten Chinese food and had no idea what to expect. It was the first food in a long time that was not spicy hot so I enjoyed the whole experience very much.

## **24 Parganas**

My final month in India, before leaving for Bangladesh, was spent in the eastern most district of West Bengal called North 24 Parganas. The only way to get to this district was to drive through Calcutta. I was very thankful I was not alone in driving the truck through such a huge city. A British fellow named Steve was the primary driver of the truck and I was the backup. We first experienced Calcutta as we entered the outskirts of Howrah. We saw a series of industrial buildings with speed bump after speed bump, which we affectionately called spring breakers. It was early morning before the sun rose and every few miles there was a police officer stationed at a gate checkpoint with a thick metal bar lowered so no one was able to pass. They stayed in a tiny covered building which we had to approach to wake them up to let us pass. We finally arrived at the Howrah train station on the western bank of Hooghly River as the sun came up.

Since it was early morning, we had a better chance of getting across the Howrah bridge and through Calcutta before the traffic got

terrible in one of the most populated places on earth. The bridge was a cantilever bridge with two large caissons on both sides of the bridge and a huge pin connecting the bridge to the one on the Calcutta side. I heard it was one of the last things the British did for India before leaving and to this day is still one of the largest cantilever bridges in the world. Once in the city we found that navigating the roads was not as easy as the country roads we were used to driving on. The biggest challenge was navigating the trams or street cars. Since they were fixed to the tracks in the middle of the street, we had to make sure we got out of their way.

The rule of the road in rural India was a bit different as the largest truck stays on the road and every other vehicle pulls off to the side. Most of the small roads were only wide enough for a single huge truck. I had seen what happened when a truck tried to pass another truck as they both got off the pavement and onto the shoulders, which often had deep pot holes in the clay soil. More than once I had seen trucks flipped over on the side in the ditch as the truck had been overloaded with cargo and had either hit a pot hole or had broken a metal spring or axle. Even though our truck was larger than most Indian trucks, we moved over onto the shoulder since they always carried much heavier loads than we had.

In Calcutta during congested street driving, we had to quickly move over when a tram came down the middle of the street. At the same time there were tons of people, rickshaws, cows and goats everywhere that we had to watch out for on both sides. As we drove slowly through the city I was constantly watching out for Steve as he drove. Near the center of town in B.B.D. Bagh (or Dalhousie Square) the traffic let up slightly which was a relief, but upon leaving that central part of town we got too close to a tram and it took off the driver's side mirror. We were disappointed since the truck had just come over land in my group a couple of months before and yet in an instant we had destroyed one of the mirrors. Since the truck was so large, mirrors were extremely useful when maneuvering the truck. As we reached the Sealdah train station, we had nearly passed through the whole city and yet we still had to find the road to 24 Parganas.

We stopped to ask several people who all pointed us in the same direction. As we turned a corner we saw the train tracks behind the small shops and then immediately before us was a huge problem. There was a thick black and yellow metal bar crossing the road in front of us. The bar was useful in that it made sure a vehicle could safely go under the train bridge if it cleared the bar. We thought it was possible to clear, so we slowly drove the truck to the bar, only to find out that we were inches too high. The bigger problem was that we had many vehicles behind us and no mirror to navigate. I motioned to clear out those behind us so we could turn around. I was thankful that Steve was an experienced driver and somehow got us turned around. After asking many people walking along the side of the road and local shop keepers, we finally made it out of the city with their helpful directions.

Our first big event on arriving in 24 Parganas was attending the Durga puja in the village close to where we were staying. The village normally had 2000 inhabitants but during the biggest festival of the year for Bengalis it seemed like everyone from the surrounding villages was present. There were three large canvas tents set up in a huge field and in front of each were four or five small idols and inside each tent was a large Durga idol. Next to each idol was a priest who offered food to the idol (called prasad) and in turn was giving it to those who passed by. We only observed this tradition and did not participate. We had seen some of the local artisans making the idols during the previous week as we went around selling books. There were many grayish brown clay idols around the shops and then they suddenly became very colorful as they were painted later on in the week. I found it interesting that during such an important spring festivals the people were still very interested in buying our books. During the festival we parked the truck along the main road and sold books from the back of the truck to people who stopped. Since it was night time, we did not have problems with people coming to stare at the white people like myself, but there was a constant flow of crowds who stopped by and wanted to learn about what we were doing. We stayed until the end of the festival when they had a large procession to take the idols to a nearby river and ceremonially wash them by leaving them in the water. After a full day I looked back and marveled at how

I had witnessed people searching to know God. Something I seldom saw in Europe or the USA.

For the final two weeks in 24 Parganas, we moved to a tiny farm in the middle of fruit trees and rice paddies. One of the Bengali team members named Prateet was from this area and one of his relatives invited us to stay in her home. Her husband did not live at their small farm home as he worked in Calcutta and sent money home to her once a month. She had an extra room and was very happy to have us stay in the empty building next to her house. It was really difficult to find her house as it is one thing for Prateet to take a bus to see her but another to receive reliable directions on how to get there. There were no villages nearby and few people on the roads to ask for directions. The whole area was one green rice paddy after another with banana and coconut trees clustered together in the distance. The paved road was elevated above the rice paddies on both sides. Somehow we finally managed to find her house.

There was a tiny metal lean-to shop at the dirt path entrance to this woman's house. When we pulled onto the dirt road we contemplated trying to drive part of the way to the farm as it was a mile down this dirt path. We decided to try to take the truck down the path, but within twenty feet of the shop, the right front truck tire sank partially into the rice padding. As the rest of the team headed off into the sunset to meet Prateet's relatives, Steve and I set out to dig the truck tire out of the rice paddy so we could park it next to the shop. It was totally dark by the time we were able to get the truck out of the mud. As I moved in front of the truck lights I saw an interesting sight. I had leeches all over my legs from standing in the rice padding when I was placing a piece of wood under the truck tire. It was fun peeling them off one by one as blood ran down my legs. We were both quite a sight as we reached our sleeping quarters completely covered in mud from the waist down.

For two weeks we walked down the narrow elevated paths to and from the home and eventually could have walked it in our sleep. We visited the shop every morning to drink chai before driving off in the truck. The shop keeper watched the truck for us every night as he

always slept in his shop, so we did not worry about the truck. Everyone in that area knew Prateet so we knew it was safe. It was during this time that I fell in love with that part of West Bengal.

It was so quiet and peaceful with no electricity anywhere for miles. In the morning hours I woke up at day break and went to the nearby pond and in my daily journal I drew in pen and pencil the things that I saw. It was the most fertile place I had ever seen. Around the pond were date palm, coconut, papaya, jack fruit and banyan trees. As a child I had always loved the woods in Virginia but I had not seen such varieties of trees since I had entered India. I studied each one in great detail as I drew them and asked Prateet to tell me about them at the same time. They also had a few pineapple plants as well. Of course I had to taste the fresh fruit also!

It was also the first time I realized that rice had a flavor. We had puffed rice for breakfast and visited a local shop where it was made. Some days we had fresh unprocessed red rice, which poor people normally ate but I found extremely tasty. If we had extra rice left over at night, it was submersed in water and in the morning we had fermented rice to eat. That was my least favorite rice as I did not like how it tasted. We had smashed rice, which tasted really good with fresh buffalo milk and some crystallized sugar cane on top.

We daily had bananas as we pulled them off the nearby trees. I also learned there are many varieties of bananas, which was something I never considered. There were small sweet ones, there were large long ones, there were large fat ones with big pepper corn sized seeds in them that were hard enough to break your teeth. In the evenings we opened green coconuts and drank the juice. The most strange taste of all for me was jack fruit. It tasted just like Wrigley's Juicy Fruit Gum, but the fruit was kind of slimy. Sticking my hand inside the large green thorny oblong sphere to pull out slimy fruit just did not excite me with so many other delicious fruits around. At least I did not have any concern about getting scurvy again as I was living on fruit and rice. I was sad when I had to leave this wonderful place behind as Prateet's aunt was the nicest person ever, but I knew it could not last forever.

## 20. Bangladesh

When it came time to leave India after my first six months, I went back to the Sealdah train station on the East side of Calcutta to catch a train to the Bangladesh border. The last time I was in Calcutta I met a man from Britain who had just come back from a trip by land from Bangladesh. He told me about the trip and what I had to do as it was a series of different forms of transportation and definitely an adventure. As I left the Sealdah train station I was trying to recollect his detailed instructions. The easiest part was the locating the correct train from the Sealdah train station. It was much smaller than the Howrah station on the West side of Calcutta. Since the Hooghly River split Calcutta, the eastern trains never crossed the river and were not as crowded as those on the West side of the river.

Traveling in the train to the border reminded me of 24 Parganas but was more densely populated. I saw rice paddies and the same varieties of palm trees lining the railway tracks. The closer we got to the border town of Bangaon, the train became nearly empty as it was the final stop for the train. I then located an auto rickshaw to take me as close to the border as possible. I did not see the actual border crossing as I stepped out of the auto but I did see a path through the surrounding shops. When I got through the small cluster of shops I saw the path end and a small bamboo bridge led me across something that looked like a green running sewer, which from the smell also led me to believe I should stay in the center of the rail free bridge. After making it across the twenty foot bridge I went through a few more stores and saw a single tan building which comprised the India border crossing. There was a paved road next to the building, so I wondered why I was dropped off on the scenic route instead of being taken by road. I only walked a hundred yards so it was not a big deal, but I was just curious why a foreigner was taken along such a route.

There were very few people walking across the border and I was the only foreigner in sight. The border patrol on the India side was disturbed that I had a cassette player on my passport but I did not have it with me. After making me sit for over an hour while they discussed

it among themselves with an occasional harsh look my way, they finally let me through without paying the required fee. I was not sure if they saw so few white people come through the border that they did not know what to do or just wanted me to bribe them so I could leave quicker. Yet another thing I will never know. I then had to go through the Bangladesh border crossing which was a cluster of blue gray buildings on the other side of the heavy metal bar that crossed the road and marked the real border between India and Bangladesh.

The first thing I noticed was that the Bangladeshi border officials knew very little English and all the signs were in the Bengali script. In India it was very common to see signs in both Hindi and English or in the case of West Bengal Bengali and English but that was only in the big cities. I definitely felt like I was out in the middle of nowhere at the border. It was hard to know which building I was supposed to go into, so I stopped at a couple of them and found no one was in them. Finally a guard motioned to me to come to him and showed me the way into his building. I was like a prize he had found to show the officials inside! I was taken to the head official who knew English. He offered me chai and snacks, which I gladly accepted. He wanted to know why I was coming overland instead of flying like all the other foreigners did. When I told him I had been living in 24 Parganas and it was easier to come by train overland he clearly understood. We had a pleasant conversation and he welcomed me into his motherland, which gave me a good first impression of Bangladesh.

Once through the customs buildings, I saw many cycle rickshaws who all seemed to attack me when they saw me. I had been told to avoid them as my destination was Jessore and that was too far and expensive to go by rickshaw. I found a local bus near the rickshaws waiting for border crossers as there was only a single road going out from the border. I asked the driver if the local bus would take me to Jessore and he motioned for me to enter the bus. I traveled by bus a couple of times in India and this was a very different bus from the red and yellow India government buses. This bus looked very old and was a light blue color with all kinds of designs painted on the sides. Instead of the driver having their favorite God on the dash, all of those adornments were missing. He had a prayer rug on the bus dashboard

ready for the daily prayer times. He had a bright checker patterned lungi with a dirty white shirt and a white Muslim cap. There were several women on the bus who were covered in black from head to toe with children in their laps. The bus was not crowded and was in no way comfortable.

The ride to Jessore was over two hours and this was a local bus so it stopped frequently to drop people off and pick up more riders. It was evening when we arrived in Jessore and I was very tired. My British friend told me what bus company to find that would take me to the capital of Dacca so I found it by asking the driver before I exited the bus. Since the bus was to leave at 4 a.m., they directed us to go to an empty building to sleep until the morning. I thought that was a bit odd, but I was not alone as there were five other men with me. I was a bit worried on how I would wake up so early, but I fell asleep hoping something would wake me up as I had no watch or alarm clock. There was no electricity in the building as it was just a shell of a building with concrete walls and floors with no doors or furniture. I assumed we were squatting in an empty building which had nothing to do with the bus line. The rustle of people moving around and speaking Bengali woke me up just in time. After quickly folding my sleeping bag, I followed them to the bus as they seemed to know where they were going. I then found out that one of the men I followed was the bus driver!

I really had no idea what to expect on the bus ride since it was completely dark and I had nothing else to do but try to sleep. I quickly found out that it was not possible as the bus shook violently as it hit frequent holes in the road. As the morning light appeared we stopped at a ferry crossing. It was becoming more interesting with every minute. The ferry was very small and held only the bus and a few other passengers on foot or bicycle. The river was only a couple of hundred feet across and I wondered why no bridge was built to cross it. I did enjoy yet another mode of transportation in my ever growing list. After several more hours of driving on the elevated road through constant rice paddies, we arrived at Goalanda boat launch.

As I viewed the huge river before me, I learned that this was the end of my ride with my current bus driver. The plan was for everyone

get off the bus and to cross the river by boat to catch another bus on the other side to Dacca. There were tons of buses lined up along the river bank and shop keepers set up along the river to sell their wares to the travelers. All of those on the bus went into one of the temporary looking bamboo shelters to eat lunch and I had my first Bangladeshi meal of rice and fish curry with dhal. It was not spicy hot and I really enjoyed it. As we finished, the bus driver directed us to a boat down the steep sandy riverbank.

Upon seeing the boat I really got worried. There was a twenty foot wooden ramp about a foot wide from the sandy bank to the tip of the boat. There were small raised wooden foot holds every few feet but there was nothing to hold onto with my hands. My only luggage was my metal trunk and I was scared I would lose my balance and fall into the water ten feet below. All the women and men getting on the boat put their luggage on their head and just walked up the plank and into the boat. Somehow I made it, but I am sure I amused many people watching the white person uneasily walking the plank.

The confluence of Jamuna and Ganges rivers to form the Padma changed the location of the boat launches every year. The other side of the river was visible but it seemed very far away. The river was choppy greenish brown color and I was glad I did not fall into it. In under an hour we reached the other side, but it was very different from the steep banks on the western side. It was a gradual sandy beach with many wooden slats laid on the ground for the new arrivals to walk from the water edge to the line of waiting buses. I was a bit thirsty so I helped out a very small boy following me in that I bought a green coconut from him to drink. He was happy and so was I as it reminded me of the farm in 24 Parganas. As we entered the bus I was thinking my trip would be over soon.

The road was quite good to Dacca and our driver seemed to be in a hurry to get to his destination, and yet it took well over an hour before we reached the edge of Dacca. Fortunately, I got out at the second stop in Mohammedpur. From my earlier directions I knew how to locate the house where I would be staying as it was right across the road from the new National Assembly building that was being

constructed. When I reached the house, all I wanted to do was sleep and lay still as I had been traveling for two days, but it seemed much longer than that.

## **Dacca**

I was not in the best of health when I arrived in Bangladesh. I somehow had it in my mind that suffering was a good thing and forsaking all creature comforts would somehow make me a better follower of Jesus. I was young and naive when I entered India six months before and was learning how to deal with a dramatic change of culture and scenery. While in India I had nothing to cling to that was familiar to me. I had been warned while in Germany but did not understand why that was important at the time. I was clearly now in a culture that contrasted greatly to where I had been living, so I had to adjust yet again.

The Muslim call to prayer at 4:30 a.m. was my first notice that I was to learn yet another culture, religion and way of life. The climate was a big change for me as it was hot and humid. I slept in the living room on a straw floor mat directly under the ceiling fan. I did not want to lay on my sleeping bag as it would get soaking wet with sweat and then that seemed pointless to have to dry it out each day.

The next day I met the leader of the base for the first time, and we became friends over the next six months. As I spoke to him about my previous six months in India, we decided it would be best for me to try to recover my health by helping him with the vehicles around the base. He also formulated a plan for me during my time in Bangladesh to start exercising each day and to read a set of books. There was always extra time, whether waiting for a spare tire to be patched or in line to get train or bus tickets. He suggested I use this time to study about my faith and to redeem the time for good. My daily goals were to exercise for twenty minutes the first thing each morning, followed by an hour of reading my Bible including memorizing it, and reading from my book list for an hour each day, and at night before going to sleep to pray for fifteen to thirty minutes.

After a month in Dacca I left by bus to return to Jessore on the nine hour trip from which I had already traveled. I went to join a team which had just arrived in the city. There was another American on that team who was leaving Bangladesh to return home to USA and I was to replace him as the Landrover driver. Not since my time in Gujarat had I seen an American. We celebrated by playing basketball in our Bata chappals on a goal next to the house where we were staying.

Within my first month in Bangladesh, tragedy struck as the president of Bangladesh was assassinated. I did not know what that meant exactly, but I knew it could not be good news for the country. Near the same time I received a letter from home that also was bad news for me. The church I attended in my home town sent me a letter that the pastor, who was a close friend, had separated from his wife after having marriage problems. He was stepping down as a leader in the church, which was unsettling to me as that church sent me money each month to support me. Within another week I learned that my sister was pregnant with her first child, which for me was yet another thing I would miss by not being in the USA.

At the end of that month I got really sick. As the temperature rose and the humidity increased I developed a heat rash called Prickly Heat, which resulted in red bumps all over my legs which severely itched. It was difficult to sleep, and one morning when I awoke, my team leader Azad was fanning me to cool me off so I must have looked really bad. Afterwards my stomach also took a bad turn. I was constantly going to the toilet for ten to twelve times a day and after a week I became very weak. I was responsible for driving the Landrover for my teammates so I felt bad that I was too sick to drive. All the time Azad took loving care of me, unlike anything I had ever experienced in India.

Just as I was beginning to feel a little better, I drove the team members to a nearby river and waited in the Landrover. Three young people came up to the window and started making fun of me and I tried to ignore them. When they saw I was not paying attention to them, they told some small children to jump on the hood and on top of the vehicle. Then the ring leader started asking me for money and opening the passenger doors and shouting at me. Just when I thought

I could not take it any more, Azad and the team members came back and yelled even louder at them and drove them off. Ajit was the first one to reach me and got so angry I thought someone would get hurt. It definitely made an impression on me as I had serious communication problems with every one on the team except Azad.

Azad was like a linguist as he was fluent in Arabic, Urdu, Persian, Bengali and English. He grew up in a strict Muslim family and had done language study to become a mullah or priest. Another team member named Copi was so friendly he bothered me. He wanted to help me learn Bengali so I could talk to every one on the team besides Azad. After these team members came to my rescue I changed my way of thinking as I saw how much they took care of me when I was not friendly to them. From that time I was determined to learn Bengali so I could learn more about them.

## **Jessore region**

When we ran out of “Injil Sharif” books to sell, we drove south to Khulna to a boat launch where the Dacca base shipped a new supply of books. On the way I was not paying attention and hit a sharp speed bump at full speed. Copi bumped his head on the Landrover ceiling and it really bothered me that I had not been watching the road more closely. I did not need to be fluent in Bengali to tell him over and over that I was sorry.

As we picked up the books, I received a group of letters from home. My mother told me that my best childhood friend's father had killed himself. Also the father of my high school tennis buddy had died of old age. Another friend's father had died from an allergic reaction to bees. Not exactly the good news I was wanting to hear from home as I wanted to know how every one missed me. I realized I was missing big events while I was half way around the world. At the same time I finally realized that I had to forget about the marriage I planned before leaving for Belgium. I was constantly changing into a new person and had so many new experiences that I knew my girl friend would never understand.

In the evening we stayed at Tuhin's home, who was one of our team members. He came from a very rich family and had a tennis court in his back yard. They even had a concrete swimming pool next to it. The house was a large two story mansion that I had not seen while in Bangladesh. It was interesting to see how different each of the team members were and of course I immediately judged him as being a rich person after seeing his house. His mother and father were the nicest people ever which humbled me to have judged him and his family so quickly. I thought I was sacrificing so much and was a very spiritual person because of it. Events like these brought me back down to earth as quick as I rose above it!

As we drove through the towns of Jhenidah, Kaliganj, Magura, and Kushtia and the surrounding villages I was surprised to run into foreigners. Something that had not happened to me in India. One was a missionary from Mississippi, another was from England, another one was from Germany. While in Jessore we stayed in the Swedish New Life Center and for a couple of nights we stayed with a Scottish missionary who ran a Catholic Mission. He was helping orphans create leather and jute products to sell within Bangladesh. It was the first time I had seen missionaries who were training the local people in sustainable trades instead of doing relief work. Later on I saw missionaries in Khulna who helped men make their own rickshaws in a work shop and then they paid off the loans they borrowed to build the rickshaws. Such great things compared to the relief workers I had heard about in Dacca that gave food to hungry people but did not help them out of their poverty. I began to see it took many kinds of people working in different ways to help such a poor country get ahead.

As we traveled around the remote villages I marveled at the beauty around me. Some parts were extremely dense jungles where I hardly saw anything past the edge of the road. Other places were bright green fields of rice with groups of date trees clumped together along the narrow paths between the rice paddies. One time I got completely lost and took a wrong turn in looking for a local market and we ended up on a really bad dirt road. It was not for vehicles but one for bullock carts. The ruts from the large carts definitely did not match the wheel base for the Landrover, so it was a constant battle to

avoid getting stuck. The monsoon season had not fully begun but it had been raining on us several evenings before. We kept thinking we would find the market and then the road turned into mud and grass. I knew I could not stop as I had to keep going or we would get stuck in the middle of no where and we had yet to see anyone along the path. Finally after ten miles we made to a paved road but the Landrover was completely covered in mud and I felt exhausted from the intense concentration while focusing on not getting stuck. I learned to avoid dirt roads from that day forward.

At the beginning of July I had a new experience as the month of Ramadan began. Azad wanted me to start off the month by getting me a Bangladeshi lungi. The Indian one I had just did not make him happy as the standard one worn in Bangladesh had a white background with dark plaid stripes. My dark green one with brown stripes just looked too odd for him to take any more. This marked the end of the book selling in the markets, so I returned to Dacca. When I reached the Goalanda boat launch, I realized why no bridge had been built. The river had moved since the last time I had been there and the river was flowing super fast. When driving by vehicle I got in a different lane than before as now I was driving onto a really large ferry that took mostly cars and a couple of trucks and many walk on passengers. At least I did not have to walk the wooden plank again!

## **Dacca again**

During my time in India and Bangladesh I was never around girls or women. If I attended a church on the weekend in either Calcutta or Dacca, the men sat on one side of the church building and the women on the other. Both societies were very conservative in this way. When I got back to the Dacca base, there was an American and Malaysian girl who both came to help with administrative tasks. There were absolutely no women teams in Bangladesh, but in India there were many. At first it was really strange to be around Mary and Katherine as I had not been around any girls for six months. It was an odd feeling but it showed me that I had been slowly adapting to a new way of life.

I was again tasked with cleaning up the vehicle garage and to paint and repair the main house where the leader's family lived. Since all the teams took a break during Ramadan, I had to go down to the boat launch in Old Dacca to pick up the extra unsold books and the bicycles that the teams sent back. It was completely different from anything I had seen so far in India or Bangladesh. The part around Mohammedpur was fairly new with wide streets. I had driven to the airport a couple of times and it was the best road I had seen so far. It was a four lane divided highway and the airport was very new. I assumed the relief workers were impressed if that was all they saw in Bangladesh. Going into Old Dacca was nothing like that. The roads were very narrow with bicycle rickshaws everywhere. I felt like I would hit every rickshaw just before they moved out of the way at the last moment. It helped to constantly use my horn as it was the accepted practice in both India and Bangladesh. We moved at a crawl all the way down to the boat launch which was on the other side of Old Dacca. We knew when we left Old Dacca again as the bus station was right on the outside of the old town. I had never seen so many buses in one place in my life. It was like an ocean of buses, which constantly moved in and out of the huge parking lot. I felt like I accomplished something by getting in and out of Old Dacca without hurting someone.

I was not surprised to see foreigners in Dacca as every time I went out I saw them driving around in expensive cars. In contrast when I went to the largest mosque in Dacca during the evening prayers before they broke their fast, I saw a sea of Bangladeshis with no foreigners in sight. It was an impressive building nearly seven stories tall and was next to the huge national soccer stadium. As far as I could see were men praying in unison all around outside the building.

On the next day a Canadian missionary took me to the American Club. I did not know what to expect but once inside the large compound I felt like I was back in America. I played Squash with Swiss fellow as I wanted to try something different. I looked forward to a swim in the pool, but the chlorine bothered me so I only swam fifteen laps and was ready to get out and leave. Afterwards he treated me to a hamburger, fries and chocolate dipped vanilla ice cream. It was a pleasant and unexpected treat. We talked about how it was fine

to go there occasionally but definitely none of my Bangladesh team members would understand such extravagant living. I agreed that I had no desire to go it again.

## **Mymemsingh**

After days of working on the Landrover and the two Ford Transits, I went to the northern town of Mymemsingh where an Australian Baptist missionary couple lived. After stopping in Tongi to see the Presbyterian clinic run by Dr. Lee from South Korea, I continued north. As I drove along the elevated road it looked like I was driving in a lake. As far as I could see on both sides was water. I was told that every year three-fourths of the country went under water during monsoon season and I was seeing it first hand. When I got closer to Mymemsingh I entered a very dense green jungle with ancient trees. I was told that Garo tribes called this home and used to be tree dwellers and a long time before had been head hunters. One of my new team members was from this tribe and my new task was to teach him how to drive, so we talked about his tribal life, when not driving of course. It was one of the few matrilineal societies left in the world. I also heard that the Garo women were the land owners and more educated than the men and appeared to be more aggressive and confident. The Garo men are very calm and timid.

When we arrived in Mymemsingh I saw our accommodations for the next month. The missionary couple had an extra building near their house with two sets of bunk beds in it. It was like a deluxe hotel after the places I had stayed in. The problem was not the beds or having our own building with a tube well pump right outside, but the hard constant monsoon rains that started the day we arrived kept us inside for a week straight. It drove me crazy as I had not learned enough Bengali to sit around and talk to my team members for extended periods of time, plus I was used to doing things constantly like driving or selling books. I had not sat around for such long periods of time. I felt like I was going crazy from boredom.

Azad and I started playing chess together to pass the time. I always thought I was good until I played Azad. Besides being a

linguist he was an excellent chess player and a wonderful cook. It was humiliating for me to lose to him constantly, but the humility was definitely good for me. We had a small radio which helped to pass the time as we got a BBC station. On the last day of strong rains I gave up and drew the radio as a gift for Azad. As the rains stopped a three foot long monitor lizard, called a guisap, decided he liked our room and ran inside the building and parked himself under one of the bunk beds. It made a terrible hissing noise and was extremely scary. Somehow my team mates drove it out of the room after thirty minutes of struggling with it.

It was really hard to sleep in this room as it had a tin roof and the sound of the rain was like thunder. It was so hot and humid that I could not stop sweating during the day or night. Immediately after taking a cold bucket shower, which felt good every time, I started sweating again. That did not help me feel any better either.

One of my favorite things about that part of Bangladesh was the huge pineapple markets. The pineapple farmers brought their crops to a small market village and huge trucks came to pick them up. The workers threw them up, one at a time, to another worker in the truck, until the truck filled with thousands of pineapples. There were dozens of trucks waiting for full loads. When driving through such markets, we stopped to get fresh pineapples, which were the best I ever ate. On one such drive back to Dacca through the pineapple market it took over an hour to get through the market as trucks jammed the road.

I was shocked to see how the road I had traveled earlier had now changed. All the rain and the trucks traveling on the same road had caused pot holes everywhere. Twice I got stuck as I got onto the shoulder to let a truck pass. In that part of Bangladesh, they use bricks on the side of the road to support the road shoulders. As the monsoon rain came and the trucks drove on the bricks they shifted and broke. As I drove onto the shoulder and dodged the deep ruts the axle got stuck on the bricks and I had to get help to push me free. It took me four hours to travel seventy miles!

I found myself driving this road back and forth many times that month as I had problems with the Transit starter. There was a

mechanic in Dacca near the base who helped diagnose the problem, but I was hours away from him when in Mymemsingh. To make matters worse the backup Transit had starter problems also. I was only a marginal mechanic and such matters definitely frustrated me. The biggest problem occurred when the Transit failed to start and had to be pushed to jump start it. Normally we sold books in large crowded markets with little room to push it. We finally learned to park far enough outside the markets to have enough room to push start it. One of the Transits had been in Bangladesh for a long time and was near the end of its useful life. One time after pushing it to get it started, the sliding side door fell off. We had to drive back to pick it up and we all had a great laugh about it.

One of the most shocking things in my life happened as I returned to Mymemsingh on one of my many trips. I had a couple of my team members with me at the time. It was easy to tell when we got close to the town as people filled the road walking in and out of the town. This time right as we entered the palm lined streets I saw a woman in a green sari lying next to the road on the brick shoulder. The poor women in Bangladesh are easily recognizable as they are the ones with no halter top and wear plain colored saris. This was definitely a poor woman. As we got closer I saw that she was indeed dead and had been that way for a while from the bugs flying around her. I slowed down and tried to express my disbelief in the Bengali language. I was told that everyone was walking right past her and stepping around her because she was a poor Hindu woman. According to local customs if anyone touched her body to move her then they had to pay the high funeral cost for a pyre to burn her. The Muslims bury the dead, so the expense of a proper Hindu burial for an unknown person was more than anyone was willing to make. I was not really shocked at that explanation as I had seen how little Bangladeshi people had as it was indeed much poorer than India. It was nonetheless still extremely shocking to me to see a person left as road kill on a major street.

My last month in Bangladesh was spent in the Dacca base. Since I had fully transferred the driving duties to my Garo apprentice, I worked to get four bicycles ready for a new team who would sell books without a vehicle. At the same time I had to repair and fully

paint the main house on the base as the team leader was returning from England after a long break. It was enjoyable for me to use some of the skills I learned from my adopted grandfather and put them to good use.

One day when I was getting frustrated with working on the vehicles, I saw a very tall white man enter the front gate. After quickly washing the dirt and oil off my hands, I went inside to see who it was. I learned it was an American doctor named Dr. Vic Olsen, who was very famous in Bangladesh as a physician but also as the person who translated and produced the “Injil Sharif” that I had been selling the last six months. He also completed the book while being the chief surgeon at his Chittagong hospital. At six feet eight inches, he really stood out in a crowd. I thought of him as some super spiritual great man, but I came to find out he was a normal ordinary American who had great vision for what he wanted to accomplish and with God’s help had finished the task before him.

One week before leaving for India, I met another doctor who became a very important link later on in my life. When I met Dr. Codington he told me he had been in South Korea for twenty-five years and then the last seven had been in Bangladesh. He had started the Tongi clinic that I had visited previously and that explained why the Korean doctor was working there. They lived very simply which definitely impressed me. We visited together in a room in their apartment that had air conditioning, which was cooled just for medical instruments. It was strange sitting talking as we drank chai surrounded by large black boxes of medical equipment.

Before leaving to return to India, the woman who cleaned the Dacca base, named Nirjahan, invited me for a farewell lunch to her home. I knew she was very poor and I wanted to refuse but I was told that would be extremely insulting if I did such a thing. It was difficult finding her home as she had no address, but I knew the area where she lived. There was a Bihari Muslim slum right around the corner from the Dacca base, which was the most horrible squalor I had ever seen, so I was wondering what conditions her home would be in. The cycle rickshaw driver knew approximately where her home was located so we kept asking people until we finally found it. It was just a small

thatched lean-to hut among many others on a dirt mound. The other shocking thing was that she had ten children and they all lived in this small ten by fifteen hut. All of her children were outside the hut sitting and waiting for me to arrive. She cooked a special beef curry just for me. It was without a doubt the most humbling day of my life. I felt like crying the whole time and not from the spicy hot curry, but from the love and sacrifice Nirjahan was showing me. I helped her around the base and made containers to help store things to make her life easier when cleaning, but now I was eating what she considered gourmet food fit for monarchs that could have fed her many children. It is hard to put into the words the emotions I felt during that wonderful meal. The beauty of it all was that Nirjahan was glowing the whole time as neighbors came to see what was happening. The honor of having a white foreigner eating in her tiny home and one she knew made her the happiness person in Dacca that day. I counted it a privilege to have been counted worthy to be in her home for that special moment. It had nothing to do with me.



## 21. Calcutta

On leaving Bangladesh I was a bit worried about my health. I had a severe bout of Prickly Heat and wondered if I could make the nine hour trip to the border from Dacca and then the train ride to Calcutta. I used over the counter lotion to relieve the itching and powder to keep me dry. On a worse note I had gotten worms four times in Bangladesh and the last episode was right before I was set to leave. It was one of the most horrible things seeing worms exiting my body in unmentionable places. I was trying to get rid of them medically while wondering how I to take the constant movement on the bus to the border. It was very hard to say goodbye to all of my friends at the Dacca base. Mritinjoy went with me to the bus stand and as we reached it, my bus left. We waited almost two hours for the next bus, but we had a great time talking about my life in Bangladesh and how it affected me.

At the Goalanda boat ferry I saw other foreigners I knew and talked to them on the ride across the vast river. On the next ferry, while waiting in the long line of buses, the boy ticket collector came and took me to the front of the line for my bus which was just boarding the ferry. Yet another example of unsolicited kindness that I beheld so many times while in that part of the world. When I crossed into India I could not believe the change that somehow I had missed the last time I travelled on the same train. I saw people living all along the train tracks, something I never saw in Bangladesh. On the other hand, there was only a couple of trains in Bangladesh due to the flooding conditions each year making train tracks unmaintainable. The second thing I noticed from the train window was that women were selling things in the markets and women were out in the markets shopping. I almost never saw women in Bangladesh as the men did the public chores. I found the variety of smells bothered me even more on my return especially the dirt and filth on the streets.

I arrived in Calcutta in the very same way I had left six months before. As the train pulled into the Sealdah train station, there was a mad rush of people trying to get into my train car to save a second class unreserved seat. At the India-Bangladesh border the train was

completely empty, but along the way we acquired a full load, most of which boarded while the train slowly entered Calcutta. I never expected such a mass of people forcing their way on the train. Every one was trying to get off the train while just as many people were trying to get on. All the existing passengers were in the same situation and had to push with all their strength to get out of the train car.

I was told to meet a team which was staying in the Calcutta Bible College. I hoped someone had heard of it and could help point me in the right direction. As I left the station an Indian came up to me and asked me where I was going. It turned out he was also going to the same Calcutta Bible College! I was so happy that God again had mercy on me. We took a city bus to B.B.D. Bagh, which I had seen before, and walked to the college entrance which was within a couple of city blocks. The William Carey Baptist Church was at the back of the college and was a typical western church. It was the first thing I saw when I entered the college front gate. The college building was a four story concrete building on the right with a big open area for parking on the left hand side. The buildings on both sides the college were even larger so the college was hard to find unless you knew exactly what you were looking for. I was glad to have a college student with me to show me the way.

My first task in Calcutta was to get my yearly cholera shot, so I walked to the government office located in B.B.D. Bagh. I went to the government health building as they had free shots. Once inside, I did not get a good feeling about the place as it did not look very clean and hygienic to be giving shots. As I waited in line I watched as Bengali women brought their children for shots one after another. When it was my turn to sit at the clerks table, I saw him open the desk drawer and pull out a needle out of a group laying in the drawer. They all looked used and were not wrapped in sealed plastic as I was used to seeing in the USA. He filled up the needle, gave me a shot, signed my health record paper and I was off. I wondered if I would get sick from the unclean needle or whether it would prevent me from getting something worse.

My next task was to get my Bible rebound as it was my mother's Bible and was never intended to travel all over the world. The thin

leather cover was badly ripped and shredded, which was clearly not appropriate condition for a holy book. I was directed to the book stores on College Street as a perfect place to get a new cover. When I arrived all I could see were endless book sellers, most of which had very old books filling up their small stores. After being directed from one place to another, I finally found a tiny store down one of the back alleys that did book binding. I was told to come back after three days as it would be finished for the cost of RS 16 (which was around \$2 US dollars).

On the next day I got to experience a city wide strike by the communists. From the college I heard a mass of people yelling their slogans and saw them waving their communist banners as they walked down the street. I had no interest in leaving the college gate nor seeing their angry faces as I knew they would not be happy to see my white face. When I returned to retrieve my Bible after a couple of days, I found it was perfectly done in a green and white stripe cardboard binding. It did not look like a western Bible, but I was very happy with my new book cover.

On my last day in Calcutta, a group of Bible college students wanted to take me out for a Chinese meal for lunch. I recalled the Chinese meal I had in Kharagpur and went gladly with them. We arrived in the Chinese part of Calcutta, which was not what I expected at all. The fellows told me that the Chinese had lived here for hundreds of years and had retained much their culture. We went into the Chinese restaurant, which looked more like the back of a warehouse to me. The outside had faded bright blue paint that appeared to be painted many years before. I wondered what the food was like as the small wooden tables and chairs did not look anything like the typical Indian hotels where I had eaten many times. The students insisted that I allow them to order me a special lunch and pay for it themselves. I felt bad but knew I had to let them do it for me. When our meal arrived I saw they had ordered me soup in a large bowl. It was more like a broth with small round shape bones in it that looked like vertebrae. I was curious what I was eating and wanted to make sure it was not a pig dish, which I was ready to refuse. They said it was turtle meat, which only partially made me feel better. It had to be an acquired taste as it was mostly fat and had a slight taste of ham. I enjoyed it as I saw how much pleasure the students got from paying for the most expensive item for their new white friend.

In the afternoon I decided to go on a trip around Calcutta with a friend from Australia who had been in India for three years. We walked around the street markets near the college and then jumped on a tram to see the Scottish graveyards near Mother Teresa's home. I was curious to see Mother Teresa's head quarters as I had heard about her from the Indians I had been with in Calcutta. We decided at the last moment to go in and try to see her. We went down the back alley to the main entrance and once inside it was an amazing transformation. Calcutta is a very dirty city from overcrowding and pollution. At some street corners, I saw large bulldozers making piles of dusty dirt and I was told this was what was left over from the trash. There were many street dwellers who picked through the trash left on the street until all that remained was gray black foul smelly dirt. Directly outside Mother Teresa's was a noisy tram railway track where the electric tram cars passed by every few minutes. The number of beggar children that approached us were unbelievable as it seemed as if we were constantly having company as we walked around. Once inside Mother Teresa's everything changed. It was so quiet and peaceful and the cleanest cement floor I had ever seen. It was like we had been transported into a whole separate world. The nuns all wore spotless clean white saris with thin blue borders. The head nun met us at the door and showed us around. When we said we wanted to see Mother Teresa, she took us upstairs to wait outside a big room which had curtains instead of doors. As we sat on the wooden benches, we wondered what we would say to her when she came out. We could see her inside the room when a nun came out through the curtains, so we knew she was there. We had a huge debate between us on whether Catholics were indeed followers of Jesus or not. Then we came up with the brilliant idea that we would try to "convert" Mother Teresa into an evangelical Protestant Christian. After waiting an hour we became even more excited about our great plan. As we entered the second hour of waiting, God had mercy on us as we came to our senses and realized how stupid we were. Thankfully we left before she came out to meet us and we embarrassed ourselves.

## 22. Nepal

At the time I first entered India, the typical visa granted for tourists was six months and in some cases it was a multiple entry visa. The one condition with the visa was that you had to leave India before another visa was issued. While in Bangladesh, I went to the Indian embassy to get my visa renewed and they only gave me a one month multiple

entry visa. This meant my future was a bit uncertain when I reentered India. After a month passed in West Bengal, a decision had to be made. I traveled with Benny, a Malaysian friend I had met in Belgium, to Ranchi, Bihar by Transit in hopes of going to the local visa office and getting an extension. Some of the foreigners living in that town had problems with their renewals so it was decided that I leave for a month in Nepal and then get a new visa while in Kathmandu. Before leaving for the overland journey to Kathmandu, I enjoyed climbing the rocky pink granite hills around Ranchi as they were just large boulders stacked one on top of another. Bangladesh was so flat that I missed seeing any sized hill.

On the appointed day, after a typical lunch of cauliflower and potato curry, I caught a bus to the Nepal border. The bus was so full that the driver gave me the conductor's seat. The conductor was not very happy and told me to stand up as a seat should be available soon. It was a good thing I listened to the driver as no seat ever became available and we reached the border at 9 a.m. the next day after a very long bumpy bus ride through Patna to the border village of Birganj. Crossing the border was very easy and I waited on the Nepal side for my bus to Kathmandu which was due to leave at 9:45 a.m. It was odd for me to see so many foreigners, most of which looked like hippies from the early 1970s who I assumed forgot that it was 1981. I got on the bus with four French girls, six German fellows and four British fellows, all of which I gathered from the languages they spoke. Two of them were Jesuit missionaries, which was obvious from their black robes. One was a Rajnesh follower or maybe a Hare Krishna as he had white skin and an orange saffron robe. One of the hippies sat next to me and was clearly high on drugs. He told me that he was kicked out

of India due to his expired visa and was forced to leave a beautiful place called Goa, where his other drug buddies all lived. He was most unhappy and did not look much better as he was very thin and sickly. He told me he was going to die in Nepal as some of his other drug addict friends had done. It made me sad as he was not the only one on the bus who looked like they were going to their death sooner rather than later.

The bus trip from the Raxuall, India / Birganj, Nepal border to Kathmandu has to be experienced to really understand what beauty God has created. As we left the border I saw the Himalayan foothills beyond the vast plain in front of me and I had no idea what lay beyond the foothills. The foothills alone were impressive as they were about thirty miles from the border and reminded me of the Allegheny Mountains in Virginia. The elevation was almost the same, but the lack of trees was noticeable. The foothills were not rocky and were completely devoid of vegetation. They did not have the dense forests I was used to seeing in the mountains of Virginia. After an hour of riding in the flat plain, we suddenly started climbing the first foothill. For the next six hours we drove ever so slowing up and down the foothills. In some places there were a series of five to six continuous hairpin turns and switch backs going straight up the mountain. Once we got over the first hill I realized I was on a mountain as I saw the flat Indian plain way below us and nothing but a series of more mountains progressively higher in front of us. As we drove slowly at the very top I also saw the winding road we had just climbed and even more road in front of us. I saw the tiny road in the distance going up the next mountain before us. I also saw small trucks and buses far off in the distance going up the road as well as those below us coming up the road behind us. On the next larger mountain, we passed some trucks going towards India. Since the road was so narrow, the passing was done on the turns or on either side of the one lane metal bridges. Since the road was so steep, I saw vehicles coming towards us either directly above or right below. At times we went so slow it seemed like we were crawling along. We stopped for lunch at one of only a few small villages we saw along the way, and it had ten or fifteen shops. The village was not very exciting as the shops and hotels looked

similar to a truck stop dhabas in India except these were made of wood instead of mud bricks. They really existed only for bus and trucks that stopped for lunch.

One of the German passengers told me it was time to get on the bus roof as the trip was about to get exciting. He and his German friend climbed to the top of the bus and sat among the luggage. After the slow agonizing bumpy ride we had just had for three hours, I really wondered if he was speaking truthfully. I did not feel safe on top of the bus as there was nothing to hold onto nor did I feel like hanging out with those hippies talking in German, so I went back to my seat near to one of the Jesuit priests. I kept thinking about what the Germans had said for the next three hours until 4 p.m. As we crested what looked like the tallest Himalayan foothill, I saw the glory of the Himalayas before me. As far from the East to the West were snow capped mountains. Even though it was November 1, there was no snow on any mountain we had crossed so far. The temperature was quite warm and my short sleeve shirt was perfect for the occasion. The bus driver stopped once we reached the other side of the tallest foothill as there was a good sized village on the top of the hill. We all got out of the bus to marvel at the amazing site before us. It was a perfectly clear day and someone pointed out that the largest mountain far in the distance to the right was Mt. Everest. Because of the time of day, the sun was like a spotlight on the top of Mt. Everest so it was easy to locate. They all looked wonderful to me and I wanted to just stand there forever looking at what God created. After fifteen minutes of mountain gazing, the bus driver rounded us up to continue our journey to Kathmandu. At least now we saw the snowy Himalayas with each turn going down the mountain. We finally got into Kathmandu Valley as it was getting dark and my dream ride was nearing its end. The bus was very uncomfortable and I had to turn sideways in the seat so my knees did not hit the back of the seat in front of me. The seats themselves were dark brown cracked leather and reminded me of old school bus seats with the metal bars on the back. It was not much different from local Indian buses I had taken many times before, except the bouncing around near the back of the bus and the constant shifting and turning

certainly was not the most enjoyable ride, but having seen the Himalayas for the first time made it all worthwhile.

## **Kathmandu**

We arrived in Kathmandu at 10 p.m. and I was very tired after a shaking twelve hour bus ride. I had no idea where to go other than I had the address of the house where I was to stay, and that it was near a part of Kathmandu called Patan. The Jesuit priest who sat next to me felt sorry for me and took me to the very gate of the house I was looking for. Fortunately there was a night guard at the gate to let me in as the gate was pad locked for the night. For the first time in seven months I slept inside my sleeping bag and it was perfect sleeping conditions for the cool night. The next morning I woke up and put my running shoes on for the first time since getting to India as I always wore sandals every where. The rubber Bata chappals were perfect as they were easy to washed off when they got dirty each day. They were washed when I wore them during my morning and evening bucket baths. It was cool enough when I woke my first morning that I wondered how it was possible to take a cold bath. In India and Bangladesh a cold bath was welcome but now that I was in much colder climate it felt like the coldest thing I had experienced for many months. In the evening of the following day I got to see a reddish orange sunset reflecting on the white Himalayas for the first time. I wondered at how privileged I was to have seen both the Alps and Himalayas. There was a time when I never thought I would escape from the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia!

On my first full day in Nepal I went to a church that was totally in Nepali. The church was full and I sat in the back and read my Bible. I saw the person who had first introduced me to India sitting a couple of rows in front of me. After church was over, I went up to him and had a great time talking to him after such a long time. He was partially responsible for me being there and it was a great reunion for me. He helped me find an orphanage which people in my church at Virginia Tech supported, but told me there were some bad rumors about it. The people who ran it escorted me around Kathmandu to show me the sites

and we talked about the people we both knew back in Virginia. They had a huge British style house like some of those abandoned houses I had seen in old mission compounds in India. They fixed it up and there was much land around the house that was open and free of trash but also had no grass. When I met the head of the house, I understood what I had been told about the oddities around the orphanage. He came out for the ride around Kathmandu in a three piece white suit and huge diamond ring on his hand while carrying a black cane. The next day I visited Dilarem House, as a couple from my church at university, used to work there. It was a place that took care of drug addicts, like the ones I had been with on the bus from the Indian border. Some of the workers at that place remembered the couple I knew. I felt like I had to do these things since that church supported me financially and so I wrote them about what I saw.

My daily schedule was now very different from anything I had ever done. My task was to rework truck springs for vehicles returning to India. I helped an Indian mechanic named Philip with everything. We jacked up the front and rear truck axles and took off the leaf springs. It was serious manual labor that I had not done for a long time. One of us held a single leaf from the spring and the other pounded it with a heavy sledge hammer until it was perfectly arched. A year in India completely flattened the springs from the constant pot holes and speed bumps. On my second week of leaf banging, I was tired of such a task and took out my frustration on my kind Indian mechanic companion Philip. I did not have enough experience to be a good mechanic and I was not getting better at it. In the afternoon as I was putting the springs back on the “XLY” truck and tightening the spring bolts, the wrench slipped and hit me directly on my right glass lens. When I removed the shattered glasses I looked at the right lens and saw a small glass needle sticking out towards my eye. Just a little more force and that needle could have blinded me. Suddenly I became very thankful that Jesus had protected me in spite of me being a lousy mechanic and bad friend to Philip. I learned that God does not always give me what I deserve and definitely had mercy on me constantly.

When I left the USA, I had shatter proof lenses but when I was in 24 Parganas in West Bengal I accidentally dropped my glasses down

the hole in the floor when going to the toilet. I felt like the most stupid clumsy person in the world to have accomplished such a feat. The biggest problem of all was that I was nearly blind without my glasses. One of my team members went with me by bus to Calcutta since I could not see to go by myself. This time around, a Scottish man named David took me into Kathmandu and an optician made a new lens for my glasses in just two hours. There was no mention of shatterproof glass in India or Nepal.

Until that time, I mostly drove Ford Transits outside of the USA. Now that I was learning how to be a truck mechanic, it was time to learn to drive a huge truck. On my first driving session we went towards the China border to drop off my American friend and my favorite Scotsman taught me how to drive. As we reached the final foothill I saw an amazing site before me. There was no hills or mountains between us and the snow capped peaks. The sky was cloud free and above the green rice terraced hills all around us were the snow white peaks sticking through the clouds to the North. The Himalayas were above the billowy clouds and the most beautiful thing my eyes had ever beheld. Reality struck that I was back on earth when I was given the truck keys and told to drive back to Kathmandu. I found it hard to learn how to double clutch when changing gears while paying attention to oncoming buses or trucks. Another hard part was using the breaks only for emergencies as the grade was so steep that I had to down shift to go slower or else the breaks over heated. I had to revert to using my brakes a couple of times as I panicked when a bus approached us. By the time we got back into the flat Kathmandu Valley I was enjoying driving the truck as it was a new experience for me.

For my twenty-second birthday I sat on the roof of the house where I was staying for my morning meditations. Since the house was on the southern side of the Kathmandu Valley, the Himalayas were visible in all their splendor. To watch the sun begin to shine on the tops of the highest peaks in the world and then slowly illuminate the rest of the valley was an amazing experience. For the month I was in Nepal, the weather was absolutely perfect and I enjoyed the mountains each day in the morning and evening. This day was special as I knew

I had to leave in two days to go back to India. I rode a bike to the visa office the week before so I had the visa I needed to reenter India. While in the office I saw some really bizarre acting foreigners, but I avoided them and pretended they were not there. On my birthday I took my metal trunk downtown to get it repaired as the hinges had come off and the rim was cracking and was quite sharp. A metal smith put a thick metal plate on the edge and replaced the hinges with new rivets. Every thing was in place for my return to India. Before we left, a new truck arrived as they had just come overland from Belgium. This time they had a Ford Transit inside the back of the truck! It was the new Transit for Bangladesh that I was to be use the next summer. They told me they had to take the Transit out of the back of the truck at each border crossing all along the way! It sounded like a grand adventure and I was sorry that I never got the chance to take that trip.

We left for the Indian border but this time we were going a different route through Pokhara. We started the westerly drive in the early morning. As we reached the western border of the Kathmandu Valley the Himalayas were so beautiful. The road ran parallel to the foothills so the drive was straight but the road was very rough and in bad condition. I rode in the back of the truck on top of the books, spare truck parts and suitcases along with a Nepali man. He told me how he had been put into prison for one year for following Jesus. When he was first put into prison, the police kicked him so hard that they broke his leg, but they never set it. That explained why he had such a bad limp and I had to help him get into the back of the truck as he walked awkwardly. He said it was very painful but even worse was when they drove needles under his finger nails. He was tortured most of the time, but still he did not regret it as he knew God was with him giving him the strength to continue on each day. This story was just as amazing as the mountains we saw looking through the small windows above the truck cabin.

Along the way we stopped at a location that has the greatest physical relief in the world. We were in the valley with a gap in the foothills to the North with nothing between us and the Himalayan peak before us. I was told it was 20,000 feet of relief from the point where we stood to the top of the mountain. Just another sight that is hard to

describe and photographs cannot give the overwhelming feeling, but it has to be experienced in person to fully grasp the wonder of it all. Along the way we also passed by a huge hydroelectric dam that filled the whole valley next to the elevated road we were traveling on. That seemed like a great idea as the water was rushing besides the road most of the way as we went up the valley to Pokhara. As we approached Pokhara, we passed over a bridge only ten feet long but we were told the gorge under the bridge was around three hundred feet deep. Of course that did not compare to the Annapurna and Dhaulagiri (or Fishtail as the foreigners called it) mountain range before us. I thought I had seen something amazing before this, but now I was clearly seeing the most beautiful place in the world. After a short break for food, I took over driving at 5 p.m. and drove until 1 a.m. I really enjoyed the drive as the constant turning and gear shifting kept me from falling asleep. While it was day light I marveled at the huge mud slides we saw as it looked like half of the mountain had disappeared at some earlier date. Every now and then we saw a waterfall going down the side of the foothill into the clear blue green water below. That and the occasional view of the snow capped peaks was quite the sight to behold. I was thankful for every view of the Himalayas as I assumed each one was my last.

## 23. Driving across India

After crossing into India at the Butwal border, I was disappointed to be leaving Nepal as I loved everything about the Himalayas. I grew up in the mountains of Virginia, but these were “real” mountains that took my breath away and kept me mesmerized by their awesome beauty. My wake up call came just inside the Indian border as we visited a Gujarati couple who had previously been with the same all volunteer organization. We ate lunch at their small home and upon seeing their hospitality and kindness I realized again that instead of sitting around enjoying God's creation, I needed to be around people to truly become a better person. It was not easy living with other people, whether Americans or Indians, but that was where I needed to be. I took over behind the wheel from the border to Gorakhpur, Uttar Pradesh for the five hour slow ride across the flat Indian plain. We all needed some rest from the intense concentration required when driving on Indian roads, which can quickly take its toll. I enjoyed driving the truck in India, but I constantly was on a state of high alert as I never knew what would cross my path while driving. I had to be very careful not to hit pot holes, speed bumps, pedestrians walking on the road, and in large cities the number of obstacles multiplied greatly. We drove south to Allahabad through the ancient holy city of Varanasi. The road was really bad and we had to drive extra slow with much caution.

The closer we got to Allahabad the more camels and elephants we saw on the road. The most noticeable thing for me was the horse driven rickshaws, which I had never seen before. It was not as odd as the men in the old part of Calcutta who pulled the rickshaws on foot by holding a bar and walking as their passengers sat behind them. Of course auto rickshaws were every where in India. As we approached Allahabad in the night, we accidentally took a wrong turn as both of us were unsure which way to go as the road was torn up due to repairs. As we went down the side road to cross the river the pavement suddenly ended to our surprise. Before David had time to react he drove into the sand along the river bed. After coming to an abrupt stop he tried to turn around in the sand and due to the weight of the truck,

we got stuck even deeper. When we got out to check on the damage done, we saw the rear truck axle was buried down to the level of the sand. We saw the lights of Allahabad in the distance and yet we spent the next hours digging out the sand from around the back axle and tires. We had extra pieces of metal stored under the truck chassis just for happy events like these. At first we were amused as the last thing the head mechanic told us in Kathmandu was to never get stuck in sand. It had only taken us a couple of days to find sand worthy of getting stuck in. I was just glad that I was not driving when it happened. David was taking this truck to Gujarat as it was his truck for the next two years. He was from Scotland and as a British Commonwealth citizen was able to stay in India as long as he liked.

After our exhausting dig and drive into the city, we unloaded crate of books in Allabad, which took us until 1 p.m. David continued driving for the next nine hours until we reached Kanpur. The road was much better along this stretch of driving and we both enjoyed driving at night since fewer moving obstacles were present in the road. We still had to be very careful as occasionally there would be a broken down truck in the middle of the road. If an Indian truck was overloaded and broke a spring or axle, it remained broken down right in the spot where it occurred. If it was in the middle of the road then so be it. Since there were no reflectors on the trucks nor any indication of the broken down vehicle, it was very dangerous driving at night. They placed large rocks all around the truck to make sure you destroyed your vehicle instead of hitting theirs! After our sand accident, we somehow avoided all other problems in our drive to Gujarat. We were amazed at how modern Kanpur was during our stop for supper at a local hotel. After seeing the ancient city of Varanasi along the Ganges, this was like a modern Bombay to us. I drove until 2 a.m. when I came to a halt behind a group of trucks parked in the road. The police were not letting any trucks move until a convoy was formed as thieves had been reported in the area and it was not safe to drive alone. We decided to call it a night and pulled off the road at a truck stop dhaba and slept in the truck until 7 a.m. When we woke in the morning all the trucks were gone as the convoy left during the night.

Since we got such an early start, we made it to Agra before lunch. As we drove into Agra we saw the top of the Taj Mahal in the distance and were so excited to get a chance to visit the grounds. We went straight to the Taj Mahal and parked on a side street a couple of blocks from the entrance to the Taj to avoid tourist vendors and curious people who always wanted to know about our truck. Similar to the Himalayas it is hard to put into words the first impressions of something so marvelous as the Taj Mahal. On the other hand, marvelous photographs can capture the beauty without having to see it in person. It was an amazing solid marble tomb built by Shah Johan for his wife over three hundred years before. The intricate colorful stones embedded in the white marble were only visible as we walked up close to the Taj Mahal and were very beautiful to me. For some reason there were very few foreigners at the Taj Mahal that day. We spent less than hour looking around as we had to be off to Delhi. The road from Agra to Delhi was the best road in India. We were able to drive 60 m.p.h. for the first time since I left Europe as our normal speed was more like 30 m.p.h. It was a divided highway with two lanes on each side with few people or animals on the road. We knew it would not last so we enjoyed the fast driving. We reached Delhi at 8 p.m. and the first thing I wanted to do was take a bucket bath. The water was dark brown running off my body as it was the first bath I had in four dirty days of driving over six hundred fifty slow miles since leaving Pokhara, Nepal. I was used to morning and evening baths so it was really strange to be so dirty. Even better news was that the OM base in Delhi had a clothes washer, something I had not seen since Europe. Since our clothes were so filthy it was great to have clean clothes again without the manual labor of washing them ourselves. In the evening I had the luxury of playing Scrabble with Babu, who I had previously met in both Bombay and Calcutta, Philip the head Indian mechanic and Steve from England who was going with me to West Bengal. It was a pleasant surprise that I was not expecting, but I enjoyed every minute of the game with my friends.

After emptying the “SMJ” truck headed to Gujarat of the remaining books, I swept and cleaned the back and repaired a couple of minor things we had damaged on the truck during our drive. We left

Delhi at 4 p.m. for Jaipur, which we reached at 10 p.m. We again chose to sleep at a dhaba truck stop about ten miles north of the city. When I awoke a crippled beggar was right next to the truck door waiting for me to see him! For the first time in India, I had compassion for a poor person. Up to that time, my way of dealing with poverty was to ignore it and pretend they did not need my help. The beggars were rampant in large cities like Dacca and Calcutta. They swarmed towards me when they saw my white skin. I never had much money, so I just told them to go away in Bengali, saying I had no money for them. It was true in one way, but I am sure none of them ever believed me. I was richer than most people they interacted with, but I just did not want to think about poverty at all. Now as I woke up in the front of the truck, a single very old man was there below me staring at me as he sat on the dirt next to the truck. Not that I did anything great that day, it was just a turning point for me in my time in the Indian Subcontinent. Now I saw people and not beggars.

In the morning we walked around the Pink City for an hour visiting some of the unique markets and just taking in the sights. We then went to visit Babu's uncle who lived in the city. He told us that the night before an American Pentecostal preacher named Ray Jennings had been in town after weeks of publicity and around 110,000 people had attended the healing meeting. We all wondered if any lasting good resulted from it or just more confusion. It made me think about those that Jesus had healed when he was on earth and if being healed had changed their lives and maybe for some they still did not follow Jesus after getting a whole well body.

We then went to Ajmer and spent the night with another family friend of Babu's who lived in an ancient house. Every room had a dome for a ceiling and when we went up on the roof we saw the hills glowing in the moon light and the faint glowing lights of the old city in the distance. The top of the house had fifteen domes, most of which were visible from the top as we walked around. I felt like I was going back in time and lived in Mogul times. The young son in the family had a magazine called "Buzz" which had an article about a Christian music artist I had listened to at Virginia Tech and that struck me oddly. He was one of the first Christian rock musicians. While on tour in

London and looking out at the crowd singing words to his songs, he stopped his tour and did not return. He said he wanted people to no longer desire his music but see the God behind the words. He thought he had failed and quit singing. He wrote that he was recently divorced from his wife also. It made me think that even those that seem to have it altogether have hard times.

As we left Ajmer for Ahmadabad, I remembered parts of India I had seen over the past year. I never really had a structured plan of where I went next, so I never expected to be back at this place again. I enjoyed seeing the bare rock mountains made of solid pink rock bounders with little grass or dirt on them. Rajasthan was such an exotic looking place. The people with their bright colored turbans and saris brought back good memories of when I first entered India and everything was new and exciting. It made me realize how much I had seen and the events I had experienced. We did not stop at any other places in Rajasthan, but drove straight through to Ahmadabad. I slept in the truck again, which was becoming my temporary home!

In the morning I saw my best Gujarati friend in the whole world. It was such a pleasant surprise to see Pradip again as I was not expecting to see him. We quickly caught up as though we had not been apart since our good times in Germany together. I saw him in other parts of India, but now we had time to talk and catch up. Although he was an Indian, he really understood what I was going through as it was hard on him as well. He loved American food, football and tennis none of which either of us had at the moment. It was like we were long lost brothers reuniting again. In some ways it was much harder for him. Since he looked Indian, everyone expected him to be 100% Indian and eat the food, drink the water and generally not be a foreigner. At the time a Non Resident Indian was not as common as it is today; India was on a push to have no foreign influences and little foreigner products were commonly available.

While in Ahmadabad I also met another American named Jim, who had been with Francis Schaeffer at L'Abri all summer and had just come to India. I read many of Francis Schaeffer's books so it was fun talking to Jim about what it was like to live in Switzerland. He was

also twenty when he arrived in India and we both had to get special permission to go to India at such a young age. A tragedy occurred after a couple of months while I was in West Bengal as I learned that Jim had an emotional breakdown and was flown home. I knew it could have easily happened to me as well as I had less training around holy men on par with Dr. Schaeffer. I was extremely thankful that somehow God had taken care of me but realized it definitely had nothing to do with how good I was!

One of my primary tasks in driving all the way across India to Gujarat was to get a visa extension. While in Nepal, I was given a single two week double entry visa. I went with the OM Gujarat base leader, Thomas, to the Foreigner's Registration Office to apply for a visa extension. I had the privilege of filling out six paper forms and had to turn in six visa photos and without any further delay the very helpful officer gave me a three month visa extension. Our next event was to get a train ticket for me to Howrah in West Bengal. At the train station they told me the first train with a berth was in two weeks, so we decided that I would take a train to Delhi instead and maybe get a train from there. The next morning I took the train to Delhi with instructions on how to reach the same OM base I had been to five days before, but this time I had to reach there from the train station. The blue leather second class cushioned seat was really comfortable but the twenty-four hour local train was very cold as it was early December.

When I got to the New Delhi base I found out that a truck was leaving in the morning for West Bengal, so I quickly took a warm bath and we left after lunch for the long trip east. I drove the "XLY" truck from 11 p.m. to 4 a.m. with a German fellow named Fritz. I first met him in Zaventem, Belgium as he was a mechanic at that OM base. For some odd reason I really had a hard time being around him and we grated on each other's nerves. After seeing him in Delhi the first time and now driving with him for that long, I overcame my own personality and we became fast friends. He was going to marry one of the women who had gone with me on the plane from Athens to Bombay, so I knew his wife a little bit as she was an American also.

Steven from England was also with us, so we alternated driving the whole way. I drove again from Allahabad to Varanasi for the four hour leg of our journey. We reached Ranchi, Bihar just in time for breakfast, but I was fast asleep in the back of the truck and had to be awakened from my deep sleep. During our breakfast, Mary, an American who had been in the Dacca base with me during the previous summer, did not receive a visa and was going to stay on the OM ship called Logos as it sailed from port to port around India. I knew she was disappointed as she was like me in that she was addicted to the hardships and suffering which we faced in India. After saying goodbye to Mary and a couple more people I knew at the house in Ranchi, we left for Kharagpur, West Bengal.

I had driving duty at night and as we reached the forested hills on Bihar, I got in a long line of trucks waiting for a convoy through the hills. The last time I went through this area by bus I saw these hills and considered them as mountains since I was used to the flat, low land of Bangladesh. This time after seeing the Himalayas, my idea of mountains had completely changed and now I saw these hills as mere bumps on the land. As we waited in line, we stopped the truck engine and got out and asked the group of Sardarji truck drivers in front of us what was going on. They told us in broken English that a group of dacoits had attacked a couple of trucks earlier in the week by dropping large trees on the road to stop them. They beat and robbed the truck drivers. Since that day the Indian military had been in the area and escorted a truck convoy through the heavily wooded hill region of Bihar each night. While waiting for the convoy to get enough trucks to continue, I talked to my fellow truck driver Steven about his life in Britain. He followed Buddhism for many years and still liked the ascetic life style and the idea of separating himself from the world. He had recently become a follower of Jesus. Since we were near the back of the line and did not see the police road block ahead, we only found out we were ready to leave when a police man passed us on his way back to the end of the line. We finally reached Kharagpur in the morning to a happy Yudhisthir waiting for us at the front gate. He just happened to be leaving when he saw the truck coming down the road with a red dust cloud behind us.

After taking a bucket bath and soaking all of my clothes, I found many letters waiting for me. It was December 5 and I had not received any postal mail since leaving West Bengal on October 28. Mail was an interesting phenomena for me. I longed to hear news from home and people I had met all over the world while on OM, but every time I got letters it made me home sick. While in Nepal and driving through northern India, I dreamed of the mail waiting for me in Kharagpur. I wrote aerogrammes to my mother and people in Staunton and Blacksburg every chance I got, which was typically on the weekends. The cost of post was a bit expensive so I did not want to be a burden to my team finances and write tons of letters. Yudhisthir, who was fast becoming my best friend in India, brought my mail to me as he understood how much I liked to receive letters. I had a huge bundle of letters from the month I was gone. I had three letters from my mom and twenty other letters waiting for me. I gave the used envelope stamps to who ever was closest to me as many of my team members liked collecting stamps. I received a couple of letters from people at Virginia Tech, a couple from Staunton, one from Belgium, one from Holland, a couple from Bangladesh and a couple from the OM Ship Logos. The biggest shock of all was that I had not received a single letter from my girl friend for the last three months, even though I had already decided there was no way we could stay together. After reading my letters, it took me an hour to wash all my clothes by hand. In the last month I had traveled over 3125 miles of which the last 800 miles from Delhi took 42 continuous hours in the truck with only about six hours of solid continuous sleep. I feel asleep that night at 5 p.m. and woke up the next day at 7 a.m. and felt a lot better.

## 24. West Bengal again

Having entered West Bengal for the third time, I heard stories as I traveled all over India of a Canadian man who was the leader of OM West Bengal. Somehow I missed seeing him on my previous visits, but I had not been in Kharagpur for long, so that was not surprising that I had not seen him. The mechanics I met told me that he was a wild speeding driver. Some of the foreigners told me he was really strange and hard to get to know. All the Bengalis who knew him told me he was the greatest foreigner they had ever met. Such conflicting views of the very same man definitely led to a mysterious shroud that overshadowed him. I finally had the privilege of meeting him as we drove to various teams in West Bengal delivering literature in the “XLY” truck. It was the largest truck that OM owned in India, so was perfect for book hauling jobs.

Our first delivery was to Asansol which was 100 miles straight north of Kharagpur. John cleared up the mysterious stories by telling me that he traveled by foot around India for several of years as a sadhu with only a lungi and a knapsack. He had since cut his lengthy hair but still had his long flowing beard. He was totally fluent in Bengali and knew several local dialects within West Bengal. That was the primary reason all the Bengalis loved him so much. He knew the language and the culture and felt like he was one of them and the feeling was mutual. That was also why the foreigners did not understand him, as he would rather be with his Bengali brothers than a white person any day. I must say that as we talked I admired him more with every passing minute. I thought of him as my new ideal which I hoped to attain one day. He had white skin on the outside, but he was every bit an Indian all the way through on the inside. He drove fast, but it was only because he wanted to get to a place quickly to spend time with people, not because he disrespected the vehicle or the mechanics.

We had a couple of interesting experiences as we drove together. When I was driving, we stopped for lunch one day and wondered why so many fancy Indian Ambassador cars were on the road in Birbhum district. As we got closer to Bolpur we saw signs up that it was

graduation day for the latest Shantiniketan graduates and Indira Gandhi was giving the commencement speech. The people in their fancy private cars came from Calcutta to see the Prime Minister speak. I was within a mile of the only person I had known anything about, related to India, only a year and half before. Even more important was that I was close to the school that Rabindranath Tagore founded. Besides being the author of the Indian national anthem, which I had heard in some of the schools we had visited, he was the heart and soul of every Bengali. Bangladesh also used one of his songs for their National anthem and the Bangladeshis loved to listen to his folk ballads. There was something great about him that resonated with every Bengali and that included John. If we had been there for lunch on any other day, then we would have gone to see the grounds of Shantiniketan, which in Bengali means peaceful abode. I was sorry we did not see the home of this great Bengali saint.

Our next interesting event occurred in Birdwan near Chittaranjan at the home of one of the Bengalis I had met the first time I visited Kharagpur. He lived in a small village on a dirt road outside of Birdwan. I had the great idea to drive the big truck to his house. The only problem was that a monsoon rain had come through the week before while I was in Kharagpur and I had completely forgotten about it. As we entered his village, I got stuck right away in the mud, which is one thing with a Ford Transit van; however, in a truck of this size it greatly increased our problems. John took over driving as I dug and placed boards under the tires which I found in a nearby shop. With John moving the truck back and forth and me placing the wood boards under the tires for traction, we finally got the vehicle back onto the dry part of the road.

As John drove back to the main road to park, he accidentally ran over a goat and killed it. It was never a good thing to kill an animal in India, but two white people driving a foreign truck was just bad news all around. As we were trying to cross a small stone bridge we sounded the truck horn. It was not just a car horn on a truck, this was an extremely high pitched air horn like the ones used on Indian trucks. The people cleared off the narrow bridge, all except for one old man who was trying to pull his goat to the side of the bridge to wait for us

to pass. I guess when we blew the horn a second time, the goat got scared and got away from his owner and ran right under our front wheel. Within a minute the whole truck was surrounded with people yelling and screaming at us. I stayed in the truck and rolled up the windows at John's request. Simon, whose village we were trying to visit, got out with John to negotiate a price for the dead goat. The yelling continued for a long time as the whole crowd was not happy that we had taken this poor man's livelihood away from him. Things were really getting out of hand quickly, when Simon finally calmed them all down as they realized he lived nearby. The final price we had to pay from RS 50 (\$6 US dollars) and we threw the goat in the back of the truck and drove to see my friend Yudhisthir at his home in Sodepur, Hooghly district on the way to Calcutta.

When we reached Yudhisthir's home, some of the Bengali team members with us, skinned the goat and we had fresh mutton curry that evening. It was horrible to watch them skin the goat as I seldom ate meat while in India and just watching them made me want to become a vegetarian. We stayed at Yudhisthir's house for a week and went around his village holding open air meetings and selling books. It was the first time in many months that I had an open air meeting as those were generally not done in Bangladesh as we only sold books in the markets and in all my travels in Nepal and north India I had not been on a team. It was special for me to be in Yudhisthir's farm home as it seemed really big to me with a huge veranda in the middle of the house. At least he had a toilet in the house, so I did not need to go into a nearby field for an open air toilet. It was always interesting when I did this as it was hard to not stand out as a white person squatting in a field as there were not many trees to hide behind in that area.

The last experience I had with John occurred as we left Yudhisthir's house and drove through Calcutta to pick up more literature. There was a large book warehouse near the girl's base in Beniapurkur, near to Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying. This was one of Calcutta's red light districts so it felt strange going into that area. Before reaching the house, we got in a traffic jam, so I decided to pull into a petrol station and check the tires since it had been a while. The back of the truck had a dual axle with two tires on each side of the

truck, so I discovered that we had two punctures that needed to be fixed. I became an expert at changing tires as I had a flat tire at least every week I was in India and Bangladesh. Some days when in Gujarat, Rajasthan and Maharashtra I had one or more every day. In the western part of India there were desert bushes that had inch long sharp thorns that did some damage when stuck into a tire. It was not fun changing tires, but just a part of life and I was used to the routine. In Calcutta, there was a tire wallah right next to the petrol station who patched the holes for the two tires and after a couple of hours I was ready to go again. Upon reaching Beniapukur, we loaded up the truck with all the books and we set off for Kharagpur. The truck was weighed down to the maximum and was much more difficult to stop when full.

We left Calcutta at 9 p.m. after a full day and we were both tired. We were around fifteen miles west of Howrah when we heard one of the back tires blow out. As we pulled off the road onto the dirt shoulder the other back tire on the same side blew out from the weight of the literature. Amazingly enough there was a tire wallah a mile behind us, but the bigger problem was how to get the tires off the fully loaded truck. It was all we could do in working together to get the truck jacked up off the ground to remove the tires. It took us until midnight to get the tires off. The good news about the tire wallahs in India is that they live to serve truck drivers. They sleep in their shops and are ready to help if you can wake them up. We rolled the tires back to the tire shop and while waiting for him to miraculously repair the tires, we went across the road to a chai stall to enjoy hot tea. Once we had the tires on the truck, this time John drove and we never went over 15 m.p.h. as we did not want any more tire blowout problems.

We finally reached the base at 6 a.m. in time for breakfast. We did not want to leave the truck sitting at the base so I drove it to the literature room to unload it and less than a mile from the base one of the tires blew out on me. I started praying really hard as I had no desire to repeat the event of the previous night again. I drove slowly and somehow made it to the location to unload the truck. Some of the Bengali team members had followed me on their bicycles and unloaded the truck while I jacked up the back end to take off the bad

tire. We took the tire by cycle rickshaw to the nearest tire wallah. Around noon I returned and put the repaired but badly damaged tire back on the truck. Just as I was ready to take a rest, I learned I was needed to drive a Transit to Balasore, Orissa and by 2 p.m. was driving again on the four hour journey south into a state I had yet to see.

## **Orissa**

I didn't feel so tired that evening after eating supper at the Orissa base, but I went to bed at 8 p.m. and got up the next morning refreshed at 9 a.m. I noticed the climate was different in Orissa as Kharagpur was cold at night during December. In Balasore, it was much warmer at night. They had a public well in the center of the garden surrounding the house that was a little different for me. It was a stone well with a wooden frame on top and a metal bucket attached to a rope and pulley. I had to work to get my water instead of the typical tube well that had a handle that required little effort to get flowing water for a bath or washing clothes. I did not mind as it was yet another experience that made life interesting. I took extra unopened mail along with me, so in the afternoon I listened to the cassette tapes I received in the mail from my home church. It was about serious problems that had been brewing for some time. I always thought of that church as being perfect, but they were just like me, sinners saved by grace and not because of anything good in either of us. I thought of what it would be like to be home the next summer. I wanted to be honest about my time in India and not pretend I was some great spiritual person.

During the next two evenings they had a talent show at the base for everyone present. I was amazed at how many talents I saw displayed – from those who sang beautifully to the group dramas and skits. In the evening I watched the cook prepare alternating layers of rice and mutton, called Biryani, on the beach in large tin kettles resting on rocks with flames underneath fueled by cow dung patties. It was the first time I had seen Biryani being cooked and was fascinated by the layering process. It tasted even better than the fascinating cooking process.

The next day when I woke up I did not feel very good. When I went to the toilet I saw blood gushing out, which made me really panic. I had many stomach problems but never to this degree. It was one thing to cut your hand and put a bandage on it to stop the bleeding, but with this I had no way to stop this bleeding or know where I was bleeding inside. Such a bad feeling overcame me. A team member from Assam took me downtown to see a doctor, but he was not in his office, so we went back to the base. I had a lunch of yogurt, bread and bananas. After lunch I slept for four hours and woke to sharp stomach pains, so we both went back to see the same doctor, who was thankfully in the office this time. He prescribed antibiotics for my bacillary dysentery, which I learned was yet another form of dysentery I had acquired!

Since I was feeling really bad physically and was unable to do anything, I talked to the Orissa base leader and his wife about their married life. During the talent show, for the first time I was around Indian girls my age. I was fascinated by the difference as they seemed much more serious than the boys who just wanted to have fun. I asked them about the differences that I observed to see what Diva and Usha said about them. Usha told me that fellows must be convinced of what is important intellectually but girls understood emotionally and that was good enough for them. On the drive back to Kharagpur I thought about what they told me.

## **Logos Ship**

Before visiting the OM ship called Logos in Calcutta, my second Christmas in India was not very special. I was still feeling sick from my bacillary dysentery and I was beginning to wonder if I had hepatitis as the pain was getting worse every day. It is one thing to be sick and another to be sick far from home. Yet another to be sick far from home on Christmas when the closest snow was hundreds of miles away in the Himalayas. I had so many new experiences each day to keep my mind off myself. However, this Christmas I was too sick to do much else other than lay around and sleep. I spent the Christmas at Prateet's home, who I had known from the last time I was in West

Bengal. Christmas was on Friday that year and since I was sick I was not asked to speak in their church, which was normally required of me.

My bad attitude flared when we approached the church as the men were outside smoking and Indian film songs were blaring on the outdoor church speakers, which just did not seem right to me at all. This was Christmas, so I thought they should at least pretend to be holy like we do in the West on this special day of the year! I celebrated the end of Christmas with a plate full of beaten rice with bullock cow milk. Not the special meal I wanted, but my stomach did allow me to eat anything else. That evening I heard Prateet's parents praying for all of their children and for me also. It made me feel sad that someone who hardly knew me would be so kind to pray for me; it was a moving experience.

During this time I finished reading the whole Bible in one year, which had been one of my goals at the start of the new year. I learned a lot by reading cover to cover as it helped me make sense of many of the stories I had heard as a child but had not read them from the Bible itself. On the next Sunday at the same church we attended a special Christmas meeting. I was shocked to see only five men and thirty women. The church had been full on Christmas Day with hundreds of people. Then I realized that the nominal Christians in India were more holy than those in the West. Whereas the typical Christian in USA attended church on Christmas Day and Easter Day, they had nothing on the Indians who attended Christmas Day, New Year's Day, Good Friday and Easter as they went to church twice as much!

On December 30, I left Prateet's home to drive back to Calcutta as the Logos had arrived and they needed my help shuttling people around the city with our large truck. I did not know how I would react to seeing the foreigners on the ship. The longer I stayed in India, the less I felt like an American. On my first visit to the ship as I was walking up the stairs, I saw before me a girl who was from my church house group at Virginia Tech! She and her now spouse had joined the ship in the fall of that year. It was a pleasant surprise to see someone I knew from home. My adrenaline was pumping the whole day as every time I walked around on the ship I saw someone I knew from

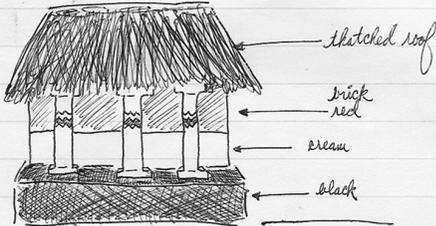
Belgium or Germany. I was assigned to a work detail to chip paint on the deck with special hammers and that helped calm me down. In the evening I met with the couple from Blacksburg and had a great time telling them in a two hour abbreviated version, how everything that had changed in my life. On the next evening they were having a special prayer meeting on the ship, which I attended. It was the strangest feeling as I looked as if I belonged but after a couple of minutes I had to leave as I felt like a stranger and wanted to be back with my Indian brothers. That was another turning point in my life. It was an obvious sign of how I had changed.

When I visited the ship the next day I stayed with Ed, the Canadian head cook, who I knew from Belgium. He let me stay in his cabin to get some peaceful rest from the ship activities. Another married couple took me on a tour of the whole ship including the engine room. Another shock happened when I took a shower on the ship after becoming dirty from cleaning the deck. I went into the shared shower with my lungi only to see a group of naked men. I decided from that day I would wait to take a bucket bath as Calcutta Bible College with my other lungi wearing friends!

I enjoyed each morning and evening driving through the jammed city streets of Calcutta with people from the College who attended the ship's events. It was the first time I felt totally comfortable driving the huge truck. It was a good thing as the crowded streets were not very forgiving and left little room for errors. I also took advantage of the ship machine room to fix the mirrors I broke on the truck the last time I was in Calcutta as well as the metal mud flaps that needed repairs. After two weeks of working on the ship and being a truck taxi driver, it was time to move to Orissa on my new team.

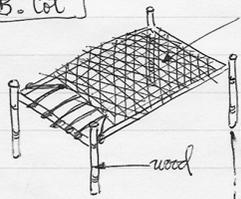
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### A. Single House

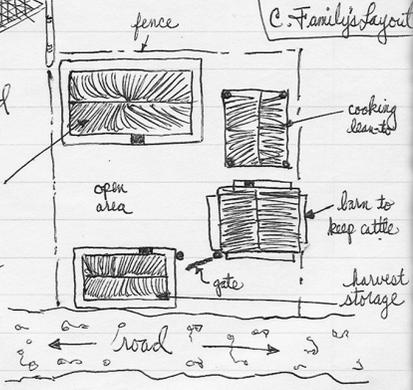


after living with Santalis for over a month I felt I had to draw about them since they are true Indians & really distinct from all other tribal villages so near & distant. They have no windows because witches come in form of black cats & if they enter a house the women of house will die. extremely superstitious under their lives.

### B. Cot



### C. Family's layout



### D. Rice Sheave



## 25. Santal Parganas, Orissa

After leaving Calcutta and the OM ship, I arrived in Baripada, Orissa to be on my seventh team within a single year. My first stop was to see Graham Staines at the Leprosy Mission compound. It had an amazing story as the Maharajah of Mayurbhanj in 1900 had donated the buildings on this compound to an Australian woman to start a leprosy clinic. It looked just other old mission compounds I had seen over northern India, but it was slightly different as there were still people living there. It was the largest compound I had seen with large open areas between buildings instead of squeezing them onto a small plot of land. Graham had been in India for fifteen years and mostly went out in the village markets to preach. He was one of the last remaining missionaries in all of India. I thought of it as an honor to be able to meet him in his home and to talk to him for the afternoon. He told me there were areas in this district that were full of wild animals like elephants, cheetahs, tigers and python snakes. I was surprised to hear that as I had not seen any parts of India that I would describe as wild areas, except for maybe the hills of Bihar that had wild dacoits thieves!

Graham was donating a Willy's Jeep for us to use for the month we were in Orissa as well as the diesel fuel. For the first time it hit me how varied India really was. It was impossible to generalize about India as every region was so different from the next. Graham told me that Orissa had the greatest percentage of tribal people over any other state. He told me there were 1652 languages in India of which 70% belonged to tribal people. He also told me that in Santali folk lore that they had a creation story with a sinful fall by a man and woman with a subsequent flood. They loved hearing the Genesis story as it made complete sense to them. Within a few hours, I saw his passion for India and the Santalis around him. Two Santalis were outside the house getting the jeep ready for the new team as we talked. They both were drivers, so I took a complete break from driving for a while. They spoke little English so Graham told them in the Santali language about me.

As a team, we stayed on the other mission compound in Rairangpur, which was about 60 miles north of Baripada, and was the district seat for Mayurbhanj. Ms. Stevens was the only person living on the Rairangpur compound. She had entered India in 1949 and told me she planned to die in India as it was her home. She was very old to me and had just broken her leg when she fell off her bicycle. She and Graham led such simple lives that was extremely challenging to me. For the first time I saw missionaries I had only read about in books. They may have been on mission compounds but they were not prisoners in them and had few modern conveniences in their houses. They lived for the people around them and used the houses only for resting and sleeping.

The makeup of our team was like the United Nations of India. Devdas, from West Bengal, was the team leader and had been on cycle teams for the last three years. He was excited about being on a vehicle team for the first time. John helped Devdas as he was fluent in Hindi and came from the Santal part of Bihar, but had been with OM in Bombay for the last three years. He came as he wanted to be part of a team to speak to his own people in his native Santali language. Manesh was also a Santali but he had grown up in Bangladesh and moved to West Bengal in 1955. He was deeply involved in a Christian cult for nine years, which had a leader who claimed to be the last apostle alive on the earth. He gave that group everything he owned including his family property. He finally came to his senses and left the group and became involved with OM at the old age of 45! He was able to read, write and speak in Hindi, Bengali, Santali and English. He seemed old to me but very wise and extremely kind. I loved talking to him as he was knowledgeable about everything and had experienced so much. I felt like he was more of a brother than a father figure. Ayuba was from Orissa and only spoke Oriya, but Devdas could partially communicate with him as Bengali was similar to Oriya but used a totally different written script. Phamsing was from Manipur which was in the Northeast part of India and to the east of Bangladesh. He came from a Naga tribe and only understood a little Hindi. Each day he practiced his English by reading a simplified Bible American translation. Eliyo was the main driver and Boas was his backup and

the youngest member was Amta. All three of them had come with me from Graham's house and were younger than I. Eliyo had the energy of a teenager and was the most upbeat optimistic person I had been with. He was a pleasure to be around as he had a great personality. Boas and Amta only knew Santali so they stuck together. On the surface it seemed impossible to live together as we had no common language between us. When communicating among ourselves, there were a flurry of translations going on to make sure every one knew what we were doing next. Oddly enough, as a team we had a unity unlike any I had experienced.

Since we were going to spend the a month in a region that was mostly illiterate, we had three movies with a film projector, diesel generator and large white sheet for a backdrop. We also had manual wind up cassette players. We had Santali audio books on cassettes which accompanied the cassette players. We also had books in Oriya, Hindi and Santali. As we traveled around showing the films in villages without electricity, no one minded the loud generator used to drive the projector. By the far the most popular film we had was Cecil B. DeMille's 1929 movie called "King of Kings". It was a highly melodramatic black and white film but a great crowd pleaser. It was dubbed in Hindi so we only showed it when close to the larger towns in Bihar where Hindi was the predominate language. We also had a Japanese film called "Yoneko" dubbed in Oriya and a film from Sri Lanka called "Elephant Boy" which was dubbed in Santali.

At one evening showing we had about 800 people in attendance. As Manesh spoke to some of the people in the crowd, they told him that most of the people present had never seen TV or films, especially true for the women who seldom left the village. This was a common occurrence with each film showing. At the end of film showings I stood by the jeep and handed out paper tracts but no one took them from me. Quite a change from the typical Indian open air meetings elsewhere as hundreds of children and adults grabbed them from me and I eventually just threw a handful as we drove away. Manesh told me that the people were scared of me as most of the remote villages we visited had never seen a white person before. They just walked by

and stared at me and never reached out to take the papers I was trying to give them.

I can still vividly remember the first Santali village that I visited as Graham wanted to show me one before he frequently visited. He wanted me to experience the hospitality of the Santalis first hand. When we left the paved road I expected to be in the village soon, but we drove another ten miles in thirty minutes before reaching the hills where I saw a village far in the distance. Ten families that Graham knew lived in the small cluster of huts. My first reaction on seeing the village was how extremely neat and tidy every thing seemed. Some of the houses had a two tone cream color on the exterior mud walls. They prepared a lunch for us and as we entered the largest house in the group, I saw that the simple interior was just as perfectly clean as the outside. The food was very simple and lacked much spice at all. Graham told me that they only used what food they grew themselves. It was strange food after eating hot spicy food for so long in other parts of India.

Graham showed me around the whole village as each building had a separate purpose. One was to keep the animals safe at night, one for their harvested goods like rice, one for cooking and one for sleeping in. I saw a woman dipping a cloth in a brass bowl containing a mixture of cow dung and water which she used as a natural wall plaster on the inside of her home as well as a floor sealer. The water supply for the village was a rock lined hand dug well about fifty feet deep with a raised rock platform around it. It was the water source for the whole village and women were next to it washing clothes by beating them on the big rocks on the ground. Their life was so simple and yet so quiet and peaceful.

As we left on the main road, I knew which houses in the area were Santali as they were clean and tidy ones. Most of the Santali houses had red clay on the bottom few feet of the house which was raised off the ground. Above the red color was a black band on the bottom of the walls followed by a white and sometimes yellow color. Some of the more well to do families had columns in the front of the house, mostly painted white and sometimes had zig zag colors at the

top of the columns. As we left the hills, the villages along the road came alive as we saw women dancing in front of houses and singing songs for money. It reminded me of our tradition of singing Christmas carols. When we entered a market nearby the men were betting money on a rooster fight where the large colorful roosters had small razor sharp swords attached to the back of the legs as they fought to the death. The weather was strange as the grass was brown, the trees were losing their leaves and bushes were bare without leaves. The only difference from a fall in Virginia was that there was no orange and red colors as the brown leaves were just dropping off.

I had known since the first time I met Graham that he wanted me to be the featured speaker at the Banki Jungle Camp. After fifteen years of speaking at these camps, he wanted to bring a fresh perspective so he suggested I speak. He gave me a list of topics that he knew interested the people, so I had a couple of weeks to prepare. The hour long meetings, where I was to be the main speaker, had topics such as witnessing, sex, commitment, obedience, adoption, and suffering. I felt very inadequate and humbled that he wanted me to do it, but I knew somehow God would help me say something relevant.

The day finally arrived and I rode a bicycle 10 miles from our house in Rairangpur to Banki along the hilly dirt roads. I was tired by the time I arrived but was really happy to see Graham waiting for me. Along with him I met Benjamin, an Oriya speaking pastor who lived near Graham in his compound in Baripada. I also met Champai, a very old Santali man who lived next to where we were having the camp. I had no idea what happened in a Jungle Camp. All around the small rectangle church building next to Champai's house were small little thatched tents with straw mats for floors. Graham showed me which one was mine and the four of us knelt down and prayed together. I really found this quite encouraging as they were serious in asking Jesus to help me find the right words to speak to the people's hearts.

It was interesting speaking to the Santalis as I had never had people so attentively listening to my every word. I had problems concentrating as I spoke a couple of sentences and then Benjamin translated from English into Oriya and then Champai translated from

Oriya into Santali. By the time they had finished translating I had to be careful not to forget what I had just said. There were some Oriya speakers present who also wanted to hear what I said along with the mostly Santali audience. In the first evening I asked Graham about the songs they sung before and after the meetings. He told me about the fellow who translated most of the songs from the Ho language into Santali once had leprosy and was now 100% cured. He was ceremonially buried by his family when they learned he had leprosy and was told never to return. It was an amazing story as he had been cured and found his purpose in life when everyone else left him for dead.

I cannot say if the words I spoke made a difference in anyone's life, but it definitely changed mine. I had never met anyone like Benjamin before as I immediately felt a bond as close as any family member. Talking and praying with him was what I looked forward to each morning when I first woke up. Graham told me at the end of the camp that some of those who attended had walked fifteen miles to attend the camp. When I arrived with my team back in Rairangpur, I no longer thought of my team members as Indians but as friends with whom I shared my frustrations and the joys as I experienced them. Somehow my whole attitude changed after the jungle camp.

A couple of weeks later the Jeep developed serious gear shifting problems. The team decided to use bicycles but they really did not have much of a choice. There was a team of girls nearby so I borrowed the Transit to shift every one around. I took the boys with their bicycles to a small village called Chingilla on the Bihar - West Bengal border and helped shift the girls to where we had been staying in Rairangpur. I then followed Eliyo as he took the Jeep back to Graham's house. I watched as Graham removed the gear box and rebuilt it and I occasionally handed him a tool or whatever he needed. After he fully repaired it, I drove the Transit back to the girls team and left it with them. As I was climbing the hills into the Santali region I saw a beautiful wild gray wolf, which was the only wild animal I saw during my time in India. I also saw many monkeys in every part of India including the big cities but I would never called them wild.

I then had to make it back to my team so I got a local bus from Rairangpur to Hata. A Jeep taxi came by which was loaded with people, but I decided to save one rupee and go by a local bus for four rupees. It was a bad decision as I waited over two hours for the bus to come. While waiting, a police officer came up to me and ask me who owned the Willy's Jeep our team had been using. He had obviously seen me somewhere else in that Jeep and even knew the license number. I thought it was odd that he knew such details, but kept asking me about it. Thankfully the bus arrived to save me from talking to him even though I had no secrets to keep.

When the bus reached 6 miles west of Musaboni, the bus stopped and the driver told every one to get off the bus. He said there was a strike going on in Musaboni and he was not going any further as he did not want to risk getting his bus burned. After we all got off with our luggage he turned around and went back towards Hata. As I was wondering what I would do, one of the bus passengers came up to me and started pushing and grabbing me all the while yelling loudly. I had no idea what he wanted but as I quickly started walking towards Musaboni he left me alone and went the other way. I wondered if he thought I was to blame for the bus leaving us. Even during the bus ride several people were making fun of me and the jeering was almost unbearable. I was glad to be walking by myself as only one other passenger went the same way I did and my long legs quickly left her behind.

I saw the mining town of Musaboni in the distance as the road was on a crest of a hill. I knew from the mile markers on the road how far I had to go but that did not help me get there any faster. I had my metal trunk and a small backpack, both of which became heavier every mile I went. In all I walked over twelve miles from where the bus dropped us off until I reached the small market village of Dumbaria. I was so tired I did not know how I would make it the rest of the way as I had another six miles to walk along a narrow path to the small collection of homes called Chingilla. It was hard enough driving that last part without any road as I had done that before so I realized I had much further to go. It had taken me nearly five hours to walk to Dumbaria and I was exhausted. Thankfully God took care of me as my

team was in the local market buying vegetables. One of my team members let me take his bicycle while he doubled up to ride with another team member. I have never been so happy to see a bicycle in my whole life.

It was quite cold in the hilly village, so I slept inside my sleeping bag and did not rise until noon the next day, as I was so tired. Once I got up, my legs were so sore that it was hard to walk. Somehow I made it up the rocky hill next to the village to use the open air toilet in privacy. As I looked around from the top of the wooden hill, I came to fully realize I was in the middle of nowhere. One of the Oriya fellows I met in Balasore came the next morning in the Jeep that Graham had finally fixed. He wanted to check to make sure we were all fine and to drop off some letters for me. Having a bath was interesting in the cold morning air at the community well, not because of lack of privacy but because it felt so cold and fresh.

We went by Jeep to a market on the other side of the hills and came back on our bicycles. The market was interesting as the shop keepers spoke Hindi, lungi sellers spoke Bengali, towel sellers spoke Oriya, and most of the people shopping were Santalis. Such a unique market that I had not seen before and may never see again. The rural markets in the Santali villages was very different from the other markets I had seen. Most of them were in open fields in the center of a village, where the merchants came and laid out their wares. The obvious difference was the quantity of goods each vendor sold. A woman sat down on the ground next to her burlap sack which held ten potatoes. A man sold rice but had only have a couple of gallons of rice. A man sold only two chickens under his loosely woven basket cage. A woman had five carrots and three heads of cabbage for sale. Compared to a typical Indian market where there were piles of potatoes, carrots and cabbage and a permanent stall to sell rice.

The cold bath that evening was very different from the one in the morning as it always felt good after riding our bicycles over the dusty paths and trails. As my time came to a close in this small village I was so thankful to have been able to see such a remote place that few people had ever seen including Indians. The people were so friendly to

us and they did not have much in the way of possessions but they show use tender loving care in every way. It was a great way to spend my last few days in India.

## 26. Back to Bangladesh

When I left Mayurbhanj district, I was close to Kharagpur. I woke up at 4 a.m. to walk to the closest bus stand an hour away. The bus was so full I had to stand all the way to Ghatshila. I caught a train called the “Steel Express”, which came from the large mining town of Jamshedpur, where a well known Tata steel plant was located. It was the nicest train I had ridden in India. I saw the first class cabins go by and they looked so luxurious but they had no appeal to me whatsoever. I was just amazed to see such a fancy train out in the middle of nowhere. One of the first people I met in Kharagpur was Yudhisthir but he was noticeably discouraged, so I tried to cheer him up. I did not have much success, but before lunch we took a local train to Calcutta and we talked to each other the whole way. For me it was a blessing since I did not know when I would see him again.

My purpose in Calcutta was to get a visa for Bangladesh. We again stayed at the Calcutta Bible College. The next morning I went out the gate of the college and got a shave from a barber on the street for 50 paisa, to look presentable for my visa application. I took a tram to the embassy and the officer in charge caused all kinds of problems. At first he wanted to know why I was again going to Bangladesh and did not believe that my university was allowing me to leave for such a long break. He was very rude and nasty to me and said he would only give me a single month non-extendable visa. He told me I had to wait seven days to get an official letter from Bangladesh authorizing their sponsorship of me. All the sudden he completely changed and told me to fill out a paper with as much information as I knew and he gave me a four month visa. I considered it a miracle and talked to Yudhisthir about it on the train back to Kharagpur.

When we reached the train station, I did not feel very well so we went to a newly built hospital to have my stomach checked. I found out that I had amoeba dysentery for the fifth time and I was really tired of being sick. The next day I returned as I had to have my cholera shot to reenter Bangladesh. I went with another Bengali friend named Solomon. I also had to get my sleeping bag repaired as the whole

inside had fallen apart, so we dropped it off at a tailor to put a new lining inside. My metal suitcase hinges has come off as well, so we dropped it off also. It took all morning long waiting in line to get my cholera shot so I was glad to have Solomon to talk to. On the way back on a bicycle rickshaw I noticed how the driver's shirt was in shreds. I felt really bad and asked Solomon if it was appropriate for me to give him one of my shirts. After a long discussion between us and the rickshaw wallah, I decided to give him my best shirt. It was just another sign that I had changed, since first entering India, as I used to ignore poverty in order to deal with it.

On February 27 I had to tell everyone goodbye at Kharagpur as I did not expected to return to India. I got up at 4 a.m. and took a bicycle rickshaw to the train station. The train was over an hour late when it arrived so I had plenty of time to think about my time in India and the friends I had made. When I arrived at Howrah train station in Calcutta at 10 a.m., I was bombarded with taxi wallahs offering to take me to Sealdah train station for 25 rupees. I got so upset at them overcharging me that I decided to take a tram instead. Only a couple of people got on the empty tram. After crossing the Howrah bridge, the tram became jammed packed within two stops. Upon arriving at Sealdah, I had to wait over an hour for my train. On the way to the India – Bangladesh border I fell asleep as I was starting to feel sick. When I woke up the train was nearing the border and no one was in my train car. I quickly looked under my legs to see if my suitcase was still under the seat. I was so thankful that no one had stolen my pitiful looking metal suitcase!

I reached the border at 4 p.m. as I had done the last time and no one even opened my suitcase in customs, which was a good thing as it was jammed with books and if opened would have been very hard to close. On the Bangladesh side, the auto rickshaw wallahs were yelling that they would take me to Jessore for 40, 25, or 15 Taka. I was amused at the variation in the prices and decided I wanted no part of them and took a local bus for 4.60 Taka instead and arrived at Jessore at 8 p.m. This time the bus was leaving at 2 a.m., so I got up at 1:30 a.m. and the bus driver gave me a special seat next to the front door. It was noticeably colder as the wind came through the door, but

I appreciated the thought. When I reached Dacca I was exhausted. I was so tired that all I wanted to do was sleep and it took me several days to recover to where I felt my energy level was normal again.

I knew my time outside the USA was coming to a close, but my time in Calcutta, while the OM ship was in dock, had been a turning point in my whole attitude. One of the first things the Dacca base leader showed me on my return to Bangladesh was a book called the LAMP method of learning a language and culture. It explained how a child got attached to the first person they saw and took care of them. A similar experience occurred when adapting to the foreign culture, which I knew firsthand. It also spoke about being immersed in a culture which forced you to learn a language to appreciate the people and culture even more. If I had seen this book when I first arrived in Bombay it would have made not sense at all, but now it was like a revelation. When on the teams in Bangladesh, I knew the correct things to say in Bengali but I had a hard time translating to others what I was saying. By living with native Bengali speakers with little English conversation, I learned how to adapt to be like them. At times it was very frustrating and overwhelming, but I am thankful to have lived among them in this way. Of course I was never just like them, but that love of their culture still exists today after thirty years and I can only attribute it to this unique way to living.

## **Eastern Bangladesh**

After two weeks of repairing the vehicles at the Dacca base, I took my first trip on what was called a rocket launch. It sounded more exciting than it was. I loaded my suitcase, bedding, two shoulder bags full of tools and two Ford Transit springs onto a cycle rickshaw and headed to the southern part of Dacca to the old city. It was the first time I passed through the whole city and finally after so many trips I made sense of the chaos around me and knew which parts of the city I was passing through. The rocket launch was a combination diesel engine and steam paddle wheel boat. It was packed with people of all kinds. A Muslim priest sat across from me and was memorizing his Quran and began praying as the launch left the dock. Several men had their baskets of

chickens to take to a market down the river. Many traditional Muslim woman covered in black were traveling with their children and they were the largest number of passengers. I seldom saw women in Bangladesh as the markets and shops I visited were mostly men and sometimes I saw an occasional woman shopping for goods. The rest of the boat launch passengers were men who wore the white checked patterned lungis with a traditional kurta styled shirt. A few had western button down shirts and polyester dark colored pants. I was the only white person on the whole boat of several hundred people. I stood out from everyone even when I sat on the wooden bench next to my pile of vehicle parts and luggage. It took a couple of hours to leisurely motor down the very wide Brahmaputra River on the way to the first stop at Chandpur.

My purpose in going to Chandpur was to replace the front and back springs that had broken on the new Transit. I had first seen this Transit in the back of a truck in Nepal which had been driven overland from Belgium. It did not take long for the bad road conditions to damage the otherwise tough vehicles, which were never built for constant rough jarring. The driver of the vehicle was a fellow American named Jeff, who I had not meant previously. He was much older than I and at thirty-five seemed so old. He had a very hard time adapting to every thing in Bangladesh and was given special permission to join at such an old age. I had been given special permission to join at my young age so we felt something in common. He had a horrible background as at the age of sixteen had a drug overdose at a rock music festival in West Palm Beach which occurred right after Woodstock. He lived by his addictions and had serious problems with a never ending sexual addiction. It was a miracle that he was still alive and somehow Jesus had turned his life around when he was at the lowest point in his life. It took years for him to recover to the point of being stable enough to be useful to anyone else. Now at an old age, he had the same feelings I had where he wanted to do something useful after wasting so much of his life. That also bonded us together as friends.

We worked on the Transit springs together even though neither of us were real mechanics, somehow together we managed to fix the front

spring which had totally broken in half. When we got to the back spring, we quickly found out that the spring I brought was way too large. Jeff knew a missionary from New Zealand nearby, so we went to ask him for help. He had a vehicle work shop where he trained Bangladeshi men to work on every kind of vehicle from motorbikes to trucks. One of his trained men cut the springs to match and then bent the spring to match the exact shape we needed as we took the old broken spring along with us to show them. On the next day we had a fully functioning Transit again, ready for our long trip north.

One the next day we drove from Chandpur, through Comilla, to Brahmanbari where we stopped for lunch with a couple from New Zealand. We continued on until we reached Maulvi Bazar where we stayed with a Norwegian missionary who worked with the Khasia tribe. Sylhet district was different from other parts of Bangladesh as it was hilly instead of the flat lands I had seen everywhere else. As we drove through the hills, we saw row after row of green pineapple plants with their distinct red tops and fruit sticking out of each bromeliad plant. Then we entered a lush dense bamboo forest, which helped me understand where all the bamboo came from that was used as scaffolding for constructing new buildings. Then for the first time I saw the plants that saved my life many times – miles and miles of tea plants. I finally learned that the unclear water had been making me sick and I drank either hot chai or green coconut milk as they were definitely free of the troublesome amoebas. Now before me were the waist high plants covering all the hills around us. Occasionally we saw women standing among the tea shrubs pulling the leaves off the plants and throwing them in the baskets on their heads. After the green rice fields of 24 Parganas, it was the greenest place I had ever seen with every shade of green visible in this one area. It was fun driving and looking at the beauty around us at the same time.

After a day's rest in Maulvi Bazar with my new team members, we moved south to Sreemangal. We arrived around lunch and as I was bending over in leaving a hotel, one of the lens in my glasses fell out and broke. I had a feeling it was going to happen as the night before the glue I used on the frames came off and the lens were being held by a small amount of left over Aralite glue. I was worthless to the team as

I was blind without my glasses, so I slept most of the afternoon and waited for their return. After eating too much of the Tamarind fruit they left for me, I felt like the fruit peeled off the whole top layer of my tongue. When my team members returned they told me the fruit was eaten by pregnant women and it reduced sex power. Neither of which seemed applicable nor helpful at the time! My long time friend Kobe took me to the local train station for the trip back to Dacca to get new glasses. I was glad he was on this team as I needed help to find the train and I trusted him completely. What followed was the worst experience of my life.

Train rides in India are special experiences as the people are the most generous and friendly people anywhere in the world and are a pleasure to be around. My only train trip in Bangladesh was the exact opposite. The train was completely full and since this was a last minute decision I was in the third class unreserved train where I sat on my bedding in the aisle. I was told to be very careful as the trains in Bangladesh are generally not safe. Some very rough fellows were in the cabin next to me and decided they needed to pet me like a dog, which was not a good start to my night. I tried to sleep but they just kept bothering me. I did not really see anything clearly, but having glasses would not have helped the situation in any way. After a couple of hours of being jeered at and poked on while I was attempting to sleep I decided it was enough, so I spoke to them in Bengali. When they heard my words, it was a complete and immediate change as they became interested in talking to the zoo animal instead of only touching him. The worst part was the crowds and the heat. It was the middle of March and not really hot as much as it was super humid. The whole train was so full of people some of which hung out both side doors the whole night. I sat near the door since I had no way to go much further into the car that was completely jammed full of people. I saw those hanging out the train car door alternated with those inside to give their arms time to relax and they repeated that all night long. It was so crowded that people were pressing against me all night long on the eight hour train ride. It was without a doubt the worst train ride in my life and I could not wait for it to be over.

When I got back to the Dacca base by cycle rickshaw I thought about my experience. I read about people who had been tortured for their faith for many years in harsh prison conditions but it was all I could do to take a crowded train ride for eight hours! I felt discouraged with my own short comings. I was humiliated for being so blind and having to tell the base leader that I had again broken my glasses. He took me to New Market and this time bought an extra pair of glasses just in case. Since I had to wait two days to get my glasses, I spent the time talking to the base leader about my future. By the time I returned to Bangladesh, I knew my relationship with my fiancé was over as it was a mutual understanding from the letters we wrote each other. I knew my past was not the most upstanding so I asked him whether I should tell the woman I would one day marry about the good, bad and ugly of my past. He told me to honestly tell her everything up front as she had to love me in spite of my faults. Such wise advice was exactly what I needed as I became confused at times in my youth.

I decided trains were not for me, so after picking up my glasses I went by bus to return to my team. On the way out the main gate, the base leader caught me and kindly rebuked me for being so gloomy, discouraged and depressed. It was really more than just loosing my glasses as I had not been the most cheery person since returning to Bangladesh. The issue with my glasses and the train ride had only made me worse. He told me it was time to snap out of it and make the most of the short time I had left. It was hard to take from him, but exactly what I needed to hear. That is what made him such a great leader as well as a true friend. On the night I returned to my team in Sreemangal I heard over the radio that Bangladesh was now under marshal law as the army had overthrown the government and that the constitution was dissolved. I wondered how that would affect me since I was out in the middle of the villages, which seemed so far away from the politics of the capital.

As we moved around the markets around Maulvi Bazar selling books, it was obvious how the temperament of the people was much different from other parts of Bangladesh. We had heard it was harder there, as this part of Bangladesh was more wealthy and the Muslims

were more strict in their adherence of the tenants of their faith. In every market we were told to leave when the religious people found out we had arrived. It was different in Maulvi Bazar as we saw young people in blue jeans and western T-shirts as many of them had lived in or visited England as it was a wealthy part of Bangladesh. A couple of times we entered markets around the huge tea plantations and it was considerably different as the tea workers bought all of our books. They appreciated how cheap the books were and wanted to read them. The other interesting thing I noticed when we entered the area near the Khasia and Lusia tribes was that they were copying the lifestyles of the very well to do Norwegian missionaries in that area. This was in contrast to those I had seen with Graham Staines who lived simple lifestyles just as he did. So it did matter how missionaries lived after all, as those around them copied them unknowingly.

The last long distance trip I made while in Bangladesh was from Dacca to Comilla to Maulvi Bazar to Chittagong. Most of the drive I was alone and I covered the eastern part of the country visiting teams and delivering literature. Because of the distance and time involved, I had to stop in Maulvi Bazar to spend time with the team to rest before continuing on in my journey. One day there were huge black clouds high in the sky with huge visible bands of rain but due to the high wind the bands were not vertical but curved by the time they reached the ground. The next day I saw white clouds forming a perfectly straight line and below it half way to the ground were black stringy clouds and from there to the ground was a gray sky. As I drove, bands of rain hit me as if a monsoon suddenly appeared. I was thankful to not have a wreck by the time I arrived in Chittagong. I was in the best part of Bangladesh for this to happen to me as the road was like an interstate freeway and was the only place I had seen such fine roads besides the road from Delhi to Agra. As I got nearer to Chittagong the heavy rains stopped and I was surrounded by hills. I saw the city nestled in the hills and the Bay of Bengal to the West as it was a coastal city.

When I reached Chittagong I found out that someone needed a ride to Rangamati in the Chittagong Hill Tracts district. I was tired but responded to the need and off we went on yet another drive. As the

evening turned to night I saw big hills all around me as we weaved through the hills to the east of Chittagong. After driving for an hour we reached a police check point. The police officer was very unhappy with me being in his district but he let us continue only after arguing with my Bangladeshi companion for some time. After a couple of miles past the check point, we saw the national satellite center with huge dishes visible in the moon light. As we were going down one hill I got a flat tire so I stopped in the middle the road to fix the tire. We did not see any vehicles on our drive, so I had no problem with changing it in the road as there was no place to pull off. Fortunately the only difficulty we experienced was seeing what to do in the moonlight.

We reached Rangmati in the middle of the night and I was too tired to care where we slept for the night. When I woke up I saw the house we stayed in was an old missionary compound on an island hill top, nestled between the district commissioner's home and district commissioner of police's home. I saw a fancy speed boat tied up at the dock right below the house we stayed in. The most amazing sight was waiting for me at 5 a.m. when I looked out to see what I missed the night before. As far as I could see in all directions were islands poking out of the clear blue green water. As the sun rose over the hills, the water turned shades of pink and orange as did the surrounding green hills. It was a sight I never expected to see while in Bangladesh. Not as impressive as a sun rise on the Himalayas but definitely a close second. We did not stay long as I had to be back in Chittagong for lunch.

Chittagong is where Dr. Olsen practiced his medicine at a large hospital in the city. I met him previously in Dacca but now I visited him in his home with his assistant Jeanie Lockerbie, who helped him write a book on his life. I also got to talk to a previous teammate of mine who was working with Dr. Olsen on translating the Old Testament into the native Bangladeshi language. The interesting thing about the "Injil Sharif" that Dr. Olsen worked on was that the previous Bengali translation of the Bible was the one originally done by William Carey almost 200 years before. Since Carey had high caste Hindus helping him with the translation, most of the words did not

make sense to a Muslim. Those who had lived in Bangladesh understood the “Injil Sharif” on the other hand. Before it existed, book sales were very slow and it was hard to survive in the villages on book sales. When I sold books in the markets, I saw how people generally were fascinated by this book. Those in the North argued with me that it was not the real Injil as that one was lost many centuries before, but they still bought one to find out what it said! It was a great transformation that had occurred in my life time and I was talking to the man responsible for this great book. It was a great honor to talk to him over lunch as I knew he was an extremely busy man. He made me feel like a son as he had a great kindness about him.

When back in Dacca I drove one of neighbor’s servants to the hospital. A doctor in a government hospital prescribed high strength steroids and it ulcerated one of his corneas making him permanently blind in one eye. He recently was in much pain and accidentally put skin medicine in his other good eye. His eye was extremely irritated, so I took him to the hospital. It made me thankful that I had two good eyes and this one event helped me ease out of my depression. I felt so sorry for him. On my return after a short driving trip out of Dacca, I picked him up from the hospital. His only good eye was bandaged and he was so happy to hear my Bengali accent as I walked him to the Transit to take him home. Again it made me want to cry seeing him so happy when he had so much to be depressed about. Yet another major milestone in my life where small circumstances changed my perspective on life.

On my final trip in Bangladesh I headed off to Comilla to the yearly conference being held at a missionary compound that I had visited earlier. This time I was staying with a team in one of the spare missionary houses that even had western toilets! I felt as if it was a transition period for me to ease back into Western lifestyle. At the end of the conference we all went to see an ancient archaeological dig of a sixth century Buddhist school. I barely made out the forms of the school in the small mounds on the site. It was interesting to see the ancient history preserved by people of a completely different religion. I thought about what life was like for them so long ago as I walked around the ruins. We stayed on in Comilla to sell books in the

surrounding markets, so I got to enjoy the shower, sinks, mirror, desk and chair. All the conveniences I had not experienced for a long time.

On one of my last visits to markets in Bangladesh, a CIB officer approached and asked for my book selling permit, which was news to me. When I did not produce one, he took me along with all of my team mates to the police station. After a long discussion, they decided that we did not need one and then bought some of our books. Such a strange event and yet it had a good ending. The odd thing about selling in Comilla markets or even closer to Dacca was that I was bombarded with requests for free books. They told me that in Dacca white people gave things away for free so I should do the same. In one cow seller's market it became so bad that I was surrounded by a couple of young boys who would not leave me alone and kept pushing me for free books. When my team mates saw what was happening, we had to leave the market to escape the seekers of everything free. The money we sold for books easily covered our food expenses as we spent 60 Taka each day for all six of us to eat three meals a day, which meant for a week it required only \$20 US dollars. That meant I ate for \$3.50 each week, which is still amazing to think about. If we ate in hotels all week long it would have doubled our food expenses, so we seldom ate out while I was in Bangladesh. Each morning we ate white Bangladeshi fried paratha with roshgulla sweets. It was something I knew I would definitely miss when leaving Bangladesh as that was my favorite breakfast. I would not miss the liver curry, which I had each morning for a whole month on one team in Bangladesh. We ate it because it was the cheapest thing on the menu and I was the only one who did not like it, so I never said a word otherwise.

Since all of my team members knew I was leaving Bangladesh soon, they flooded me with jack fruit or mangoes each evening. On my final night with my team, it was becoming more hot and humid with each passing day. It was so hot that I decided to sleep outside on the cement porch, but the problem was the cement was still hot from the sun and I felt like I cooked all night long. I gave my blue nylon mosquito net and white plastic sheet to one of my teammates called Mujibar. I used them both the whole time I had been in the Indian subcontinent, but I am sure they lasted many more years. I always

placed the plastic on the ground before laying down on my sleeping bag to help keep it clean. It was a luxury that few of my team mates ever had, but I was glad to give it to one of them before I left and of course he appreciated it greatly.

My final driving experience was not the highlight of my life. After hugging my team mates one last time, I returned on my final drive back to Dacca. As I neared the last boat ferry before Dacca, I failed to stop in time and accidentally hit a truck in front of me. It dented the front of the Transit near the headlight. I was not happy to say the least but it did not hurt the truck in any way and he never knew I hit him. On the way into Dacca, the Transit ran out of diesel at Farm Gate, which was the first and only time I ran out of fuel. We were close to the base so I took a cycle rickshaw to the base and returned with a big diesel tin can. I quickly found out why it was never a good idea to run out of diesel. I got blisters on my fingers from using the hand pump to get diesel out of the filter and into the fuel lines. The base leader eventually gave up waiting for me and came and towed the Transit back to the base with his vehicle. My final exciting mechanic task was to fix the front headlight as it failed to work properly after my accident. On my final day in Bangladesh the cook at the base did not understand why I had such bad looking clothes and did not want new ones for my trip home. While we talked about such things, he lovingly made me a final special meal of two fried eggs nested inside toast along with two fresh mangoes. I was thankful to end my time on a good note. On May 28, 1982, I left Bangladesh on a KLM DC8 jet.

## 27. Reflect before Change

Before leaving Bangladesh I was given helpful advice by two close friends. The base leader told me the best thing for me was to finish my Geophysics degree and then work in the Middle East like his brother in law had done. Then Dr. Codington told me that I should visit Dean Dietrick when I returned to Virginia Tech by getting his grand daughter to introduce me. Two pieces of advice that would help shape my life for years to come.

I left Dacca on a KLM Royal Dutch Airlines jet for New Delhi. I had no idea what kind of reverse culture shock awaited me, but the overnight stay in Delhi was definitely a start. The hotel I stayed in was one of the five star hotels in Delhi. They had an outdoor swimming pool which I enjoyed very much. Even though I had been swimming in the outdoor pool at the American Club in Dacca from time to time on breaks from working on vehicles, this was a whole new experience. Servants were all around the pool waiting on the guests to see if they needed a dry towel or wanted any free drinks. It was a world I had not seen in my two year stay in India, Bangladesh and Nepal. I knew this world existed, I just had not been a part of it nor did I have any desire to join in it. I had also visited the two top hotels in Bangladesh as one was completed while I was there and was called the Sonagon Hotel. It was definitely the nicest hotel I been in. The other one was an older elegantly regal hotel called the Intercontinental Hotel, which did not compare to the freshness of the Sonagon. My hotel in Delhi had both qualities as it was an older hotel but had amazing servants waiting on my every request as a five star hotel should. On the next morning at the hotel, I decided to sign up to play tennis on their grass courts. The resident tennis professional was willing to play with me and furnished me with a new racket. I had an hour of time allotted and it took me thirty minutes to remember how to hit a tennis ball. By the end of our time I somehow won a couple of points and had a great time playing with my new found Indian partner. It was an unexpected joy to play after such a long hiatus.

On the next evening I boarded a KLM 747 jet to Amsterdam for the second leg of my journey. On the flight I listened to western music to try to adjust to foreign sounds again. I did not sleep very well but as the sun rose in the morning I looked out the window and saw the Austrian Alps. It seemed like an eternity since I had driven through those very same mountains on my way to India. I spent a second night at the Hilton hotel on the grounds of the Amsterdam Schipol airport. I found it hard to take in such modern conveniences after such a long time. The plane arrived next to the gate without us having to walk on the tarmac and inside the airport were the walking conveyors – things that we all take for granted now, but at the time were way ahead of their time. The airport hotel had an indoor swimming pool with carpet all around the sitting area and a balcony above the pool leading into some very expensive luxury rooms. They had a free lunch buffet around the pool, which just added to the high class feel of the hotel. I had a huge decision to make when presented with free alcohol as I was in the land of Heineken. After contemplating this dilemma, I realized no Indians were in the hotel so it was safe to drink a beer! It was not the taste I expected as I had lost all desire for alcohol and I did not find it pleasant in any way. That afternoon I took a taxi into the city and walked around for a couple of hours as my flight was set to take off in the late evening. I was fascinated by the Dutch architecture, which reminded me of parts of the Flemish part of Belgium. Yet another memory that seemed so far in the past.

The next day, when I arrived at JFK airport in New York City, I had a pleasant surprise waiting for me at the airport. My long time friend Pradip was there waiting for me along with Joe who I had first met in my hometown church and had first told me about going overseas. Both of their smiling faces made my day. It also helped that Joe had brought chai and gingerbread snacks to the airport and pretended to be an Indian chai wallah as I walked into the terminal. To be greeted by such friends after a long journey in the face of a huge change ahead of me was the best feeling in the world.

We drove to the OM base in Midland Park, NJ and I was so tired that I slept from evening until lunch the next day. Even with the stops along the way in Delhi and Amsterdam, I felt like I was walking in a

haze all the next day. One of the fellows I met in the base boys house decided I should see a movie that afternoon called “Chariots of Fire” which had recently won five Academy film awards. I had no idea what he was talking about but I went with him anyway. I was so pleasantly surprised to see a movie with no sex, violence, drugs or profanity and yet it was really quite emotional for me and I cried for the last ten minutes of the movie. My fragile state of living in culture shock was hitting me full force. In my whole life, I had never cried in a movie. I considered crying was for girls and women. It was odd for me to show such emotions and even worse while in public places.

On my second day back in the USA I had cereal with milk for breakfast along with a glass of orange juice but after a two year hiatus, even that simple meal was a novelty for me. I shaved after eating using shaving cream for the first time in two years. Afterwards I took a hot shower and used shampoo to wash my hair. Every small thing I did was new and exciting. I did not long for such conveniences while I was in India, but each thing that I had previously taken for granted was now a new fresh experience. This was the pleasant side of reverse culture shock for me.

The whole OM base had a picnic in the afternoon so I helped Joe make sandwiches and a tasty Watergate salad. I did not recall when I had eaten these previously but it was fun helping a long time friend make them. For recreation, we played softball and basketball during the picnic which was the most fun I had playing sports in a long time.

Since I was in northern New Jersey and New York City was so close, I decided to visit my friends in the Bronx for the day. It was scary facing such a huge American City, because of the violence that I remembered existed in the Bronx. Bombay and Delhi were both larger in population, but when I had been in those cities they seemed like group of smaller cities within a larger city and was never overwhelming to me. On the other hand, life in New York City seemed to be going 100 m.p.h. while in India I never went above 20 at the very most! It was an adventure of a completely different sort which I did not feel comfortable with but thought I should see them while I was so close. Another reason I wanted to see them in person was to invite

them to the OM summer conference which was starting the next day in Hawthorne, NJ. On the second day they were having a special meeting focused on India, so I wanted to make sure they came for that. I realized how much the first time I spent in the Bronx had helped open my eyes to a much bigger world than the Shenandoah Valley. It really made me glad when most of them came for an evening meeting the next day. I also enjoyed helping Pradip during the conference with those who were thinking of going to India as he had done for me exactly two years before. After two full weeks in New Jersey I was ready to return home.

I got back to my home town in the middle of the Allegheny Mountains on Sunday the second week of June and my mother took the first two days off from work to be with me. It is hard to express the emotions that I felt in returning home. Stability is not the best word to describe how I felt. I had contrary feelings about being home. We lived at the top of a hill on a thirty-five acre plot which was isolated from other surrounding houses. It was great to walk around the flower gardens and woods and just be by myself and think about my last two years. At the same time, I was lonely as I had gotten used to constantly being around people and missed the thrill of the constant change I had experienced daily for the last two years. I knew it was temporary since I was to return to school in the fall at Virginia Tech, but in the meantime I had a summer open before me that I had to fill with activity.

The first problem I faced was that I did not feel comfortable sleeping on the bed, so every night I pulled off the blanket and slept on the carpeted floor. The bed was just too soft as I had gotten used to a hard concrete floor over the last two years. I had my own bathroom as well, which made me feel like a king living in a palace. I did enjoy my mother's home cooking but my stomach never seemed to feel right. I knew there was no hope in getting local doctors to figure out what was wrong as I needed a doctor who specialized in tropical medicine. My mother worked in the laboratory at King's Daughters Hospital in Staunton so she arranged for me to have an upper GI series of tests. It was a simple test as all I had to do was drink a Barium milkshake and get an X-ray of my stomach. It was absolutely nothing compared to the

colonoscopy I had while in Bangladesh after my fifth bout with amoebic dysentery. I had two of these procedures in Bangladesh. One of them probed my lower intestines and the instrument was only about a foot long and had a camera on the end that the American doctor looked through. The second one was very painful and was done by a South Korean doctor who was visiting Bangladesh at Dr. Codington's clinic in Tongi. When I saw the three foot instrument, I did not get a warm fuzzy feeling as I could not imagine that thing going all the way inside me. In both cases they were looking for tears, ulcerations or anything unusual since I had been sick for so long and was not getting better. Just as in the tests in Bangladesh, the doctor in Staunton did not find anything either. I was really wondering what was wrong with me, but I started running daily and eating my mother's wonderful cooking in hopes that it would just clear up by itself before I went back to school in the fall.

It did not take me long to get back into great running shape as I was still young and full of energy even though at times my stomach flared up. Wearing glasses started to bother me as my eyes had deteriorated each year since I first started wearing glasses in the fifth grade. The lenses I got while in India and Bangladesh were made of real glass and were very heavy. I decided to get my eyes checked and see if I should get contacts. My sister liked hers so I thought I would follow her example. I still had my prescription from the eye doctors in Bangladesh and Calcutta so our family eye doctor knew if my eyes had finally stabilized. Since I had a problem with astigmatism in one of my eyes, my only choice was to get semi permeable contacts. I tried soft contacts for a couple of days but everything was fuzzy, like looking through the bottom of a glass bottle. When I received my semi hard lenses, I had a difficult time getting them in my eyes as I did not like putting them in nor touching my eyes. I was given a tiny rubber suction cup to help remove them if I got into trouble. I loved the feeling as I ran with the contacts because I did not have to see sweat dripping down my lenses nor did I have to wear my ugly looking black band to keep my glasses from sliding off my nose. Everything went well for the first month until I got an eye laceration trying to take them out. The scratch made my eye feel like it was on fire. In the meantime,

I got a new pair of glasses which had special ultra light lenses. It was discouraging as I was used to not wearing glasses, but with the pain in my eyes, there was no way I could put anything in my eyes except for the antibiotic drops.

On one of the first days I was able to put my lenses back in, I went running down the country road outside our house. It was the same usual route I ran. When I got to the point where the pavement turned to dirt and gravel I turned around to go home. There was a trailer on the right that I had seen many times, but did not pay attention to as I did not know the people who lived there. As I passed it, a Border Collie which was tied up next to the front door broke loose and came after me. All I could think of was to run faster, but the cow dog was much faster than I. As he came up next to me, I tried to kick him but he grabbed my calf muscle. The more I tried to kick him off, the deeper he sunk his teeth into my leg. I started yelling and the owner came out of the trailer and when the dog saw her he left me to return to the trailer. I was not sure of the damage but I could see blood all over my sock. I told the woman who I was and she called home and my step father came to get me. When we reached our home, I laid down in the grass in pain as I could not walk. He went inside and came out with a bottle of isopropyl alcohol and poured the whole thing on my wound. That caused pain to shoot through my whole body, but I was glad he did it as I did not want to get rabies or whatever odd disease that the dog had passed onto me. My mother drove me to the emergency room in the hospital where she worked and I got five stitches to close the gash in my calf. There was a law in Virginia that if a dog bit a person then the police would monitor the dog for a week and then put it to sleep. They did not find rabies in the dog, but I did not attend the dog's funeral!

Another more pleasant surprise that summer was that one of our neighbors had a foreign exchange student they wanted me to meet. It seemed really strange to think of a foreign student going to my rural high school. I found out that she was from Belgium of all places. Since our town was so small, everyone knew that I had been overseas for the past two years. Fresh off the airplane, she only knew a little English and spoke French. I was invited to help save the day and make her feel

at home. It was a failure as all I had on my brain was India and Bangladesh and could recall no French. After an uncomfortable hour staring at each other in their living room, I decided to call it a day and left. Since my engagement had ended earlier that year, I definitely wondered if destiny had brought this Belgium girl into my life. Not being able to speak to her definitely ended that idea. It was an odd feeling attending my church and seeing my old girl friend on Sundays, but she already had a new boy friend so at least one of us had gotten over it quickly. I came to realize how much time I had wasted thinking about her while overseas, especially when I was emotionally drained. I was infatuated with her when I felt the worst which never helped and often made matters much worse. I turned my focus elsewhere.

I had several meetings that summer with people who knew me personally and asked me to speak. My first public meeting was at the church which supported me financially and prayerfully the whole time I was gone. That Sunday happened to fall on July 4 and I felt very patriotic that day. I was glad to be home and yet talk about India which had taken over all of my thoughts. I looked fully American on the outside but felt fully Indian on the inside. Since I knew nearly everyone in the church and had written monthly general letters to the church, I spoke openly about my time. When I left Virginia, I felt totally in control and like a great Christian, perfectly holy to be going overseas and forsaking everything I knew and loved. The number one lesson I learned was that I needed to suffer to learn humility. I mostly dwelt on discouraging things like my sickness or negative things I saw around me. Only in looking back was I sorry that I had not appreciated the Indians who lived with me the whole time. The other thing I wanted everyone to know was how living in India made my Bible reading come alive. Jesus lived in an eastern culture and was not an American. It was the truth but not the best subject choice for such a patriotic day as the July 4! I related stories of lepers touching me, beggars everywhere, mangy pink dogs instead of being treated as humans, idols in temples, open markets where goods were sold, but mostly I told about the great hospitality and kindness strangers had shown me including one place where they washed my feet. A land so different from America where individualism reigns and rules. A land

so similar to times as presented in the Bible. I was glad to have been fortunate enough to have lived in India.

My second public meeting was at the Woman's Club meeting in my home town of Churchville. This was special as my adopted grandmother had arranged it all. She was so happy to see me when I got back. She was the one who told me, at the time, not to go to India as she would never see me again. Now I stood before all the women who had known me my whole life and told them about a land they would never see for themselves. I took a different tactic at this meeting as I wanted them to understand the variety of people and places that made up India to help them understand why I loved it just as much as my small home town. It sounded like an exotic far away land to them all. I wore my Bangladeshi lungi and fancy white kurta shirt with maroon trim. I also had a map of India to help them visualize it was nothing like Virginia. I spoke of the many religions present in India and showed them the Rupee paper bills with the thirteen major languages printed on them. I told them how people dressed differently from Americans some in dhotis, others in lungis, women in saris and others in western clothes. I covered the climates from the Himalayas to the deserts to the jungles. I told them about the foods I had eaten like chapatti, puri, paratha, tandoori roti, mangoes, jack fruit, coconuts and the super spicy hot curries. Just when they were all totally overwhelmed for the finale, I told them about my favorite part of all, which was the culture. I told them how I ate with my hands, how we sat on the floor, became addicted to chai, drove on the left hand side, and told stories of some of the friends I had made. No one in the room could really understand, but it was fun talking to people with whom I grew up and who knew me well.

The final public meeting that summer was in the church I had attended in my youth, which was right around the corner from the house where I grew up. Again, this meeting was attended by people who knew me since I was young. I explained why I left this church and why I went to India. I showed a short film strip on what OM did in India. After that brief introduction I told them about my experiences in churches. How the men sit on one side and women on the other. I told them about William Carey and some of the stories of the college in

Calcutta named after him. I told them about Henry Martyn who translated the Bible into Hindi, Arabic and Persian in five years time. I told them about my misadventures in trying to see Mother Teresa. I told them about Graham Staines and Jungle Camp where I was the featured speaker. I told them about the lively church I attended in Nepal. I told them about the missionaries I had met in Bangladesh, most of whom were Baptists. Somehow I wanted them to understand there was a really big world out there far different from our rural town and yet the world was small as I had been there and was now standing before them.

The last thing I did that summer was find living arrangements for the new school year at Virginia Tech. My mother paid off my student loans and sold my car since I did not need it while in India. The only problem was that my perfect car was sold to a long time family friend and then the engine completely failed within a couple of months. Since that time, this family was angry with my mother since they had been sold a bad car. Things that may be bad anywhere else were catastrophic among friends in a tiny rural town. When I got home I had to somehow make my new enemies become my friends again. I felt sorry, but there was no way I ever expected my car to be a lemon like it's yellow color. They lived right across the road from us, so I thought I would go over and make everything right. The parents wanted nothing to do with me, but I did get the son to talk to me. We were the same age and had been friends our whole life. He was attending police academy and told me proudly about his gun collection. He knew my mother did not willingly sell him a defective car but his parents would not forgive us. When I got home, I suddenly realized what I should do. I gave him the guns I had found in my adopted grandparent's dirt basement. They were worth much more than what he paid for my car. He absolutely knew what they meant to me and the sentimental value attached to them, and he took them very with great thankfulness. Both of his parents died before I ever spoke to them again and I have no idea if the guns made any difference at all. So I left for Virginia Tech in the fall with only a bicycle for transportation and trying to temporarily forget the past.

# Section Six

## Geophysics around the world



الطريق مهجورة  
ممنوع الاستخدام  
الطريق في حالة سيئة  
ROAD IS ABANDONED  
DRIVING IS PROHIBITED  
ROAD IS IN BAD CONDITION

## 28. College, Marriage, Friends

When I returned to Virginia Tech after a two year absence I was not expecting so many of my previous friends to have left. It was another realization that I had changed much in my time in the Indian Subcontinent but things had also changed back home as well. The best news was that two of the sons of the family who hosted the church I attended in Staunton were attending Virginia Tech and they needed a roommate. It was a great relief as I was very concerned about where I would live in Blacksburg when I returned. I could not have asked for two better roommates. We all studied different subjects as my major was Geophysics, but Mark's was Agriculture Engineering and Daniel's was Electrical Engineering. Mark was the oldest, I was the middle one and Daniel was the youngest. At the time the age gap seemed huge, but we were only separated by a few years. We all enjoyed playing basketball together so at every chance we went to the War Memorial Gym on campus and played for hours. It reduced stress from long hours spent studying and working on class projects and it kept us in great physical condition.

Since I had no vehicle transportation, I rode my bicycle everywhere which also helped keep me fit. The Draper's Meadow apartment we rented was the closest to the West side of the campus, so it was easy to get to class. For food we ate venison daily since both of my roommates were bow hunters and that year they both filled their quota of two deer each. I ate venison before and remembered the strong gamey taste, but eventually I got used to it and was very thankful to have such food providers for roommates. None of us were great cooks but we ate well enough to fuel our basketball activities and to stimulate our minds for thinking! Since the brothers had bunk beds between them, I was given a small bedroom by myself and they took the larger bedroom for themselves. Later on that became an important choice in my life.

On the first week of school I went back to the same church home group I had attended previously. All the students had changed and the only people I knew in the group were the home owners where we met.

I wrote monthly letters while overseas to keep in touch with this home group, so many of them knew who I was but I did not know them. I had the honor of talking about my time away in the first Wednesday night meeting, but it was difficult containing my excitement and not rambling on and on about my adventures. At the end of the meeting, I stayed back to talk to the Halls as we became quite close in the first year I attended college. I babysat for their two daughters and generally they were like parents to me. It was a great reunion for us after a two year hiatus. They always told me I looked just like his brother so we had another common bond also.

That night I asked them how I could get in touch with Dean Dietrick as Dr. Codington in Bangladesh had told me I should look him up. I had no idea where Dean Dietrick lived nor how to find him. The Halls told me it was going to be easy since his granddaughter was present that evening in their house group! That was shocking news to me and definitely not what I expected to hear. After the meeting the next Wednesday, Debbie Hall introduced me to Sarah Dietrick. I politely asked if she could take me to see her grandfather sometime. She gladly offered to take me that night as he only lived a couple of doors down the road from the Halls. It all seemed so amazingly predestined. I felt as if I was meeting a founding father of Virginia Tech. I did not know any of the history behind Virginia Tech but I did know Dean Dietrick had to be special to have a building named for him on campus, even if it was only a dining hall. I got to know him well over the next two years.

The other interesting thing that Sarah and I had in common was we both went to Heritage Hall to visit with the elderly on Saturday mornings. On the first Saturday I went back to the nursing home, I met one of the students I had known previously as he was still working on his doctorate and was one of the only students left in Blacksburg who I knew. On some Saturdays those who met and sang songs to the elderly ate lunch together. Over these meals I got to know Sarah better. I began to wonder if Dr. and Mrs. Codington set me up with a long distance arranged marriage as every thing seemed so prearranged. I tried not to think about getting emotionally attached to a girl again as it did not help me much in the past.

The other big event in my life that first month back at Virginia Tech was that the man in charge of foreign students at the university arranged for me to meet an Indian student. From my monthly letters I mailed to the church word got out that I was in India and now that I had returned Dev wanted to meet me. I was fairly unaware of foreign students at Virginia Tech before, but now I was curious to find some of the Indians at the school. Dev was the first Indian I met on my return. We became such close friends that we are still friends to this day. Although he was from Tamil Nadu, a state I had never seen in India, and we did not attend the same church, it was like a friendship made in heaven. It was unexplainable how we could have been from two completely different environments our whole lives and yet become such fast friends. We had a great time meeting and talking every chance we got. For me it was just what I needed to keep my passion for India alive while living half away around the world. At the same time Sarah and I were wondering if destiny put us together for a reason.

I still really had no clue how to treat girls. My father was not a good role model for me. I never remembered him telling my mother that he loved her or ever kissing her. It did not seem to be a love relationship. I had learned at a young age that girls were not to be taken care of but to use for my own purposes. By the time I turned nineteen and decided to follow Jesus, I had many deeply set traits that I was not proud of. It also did not help that I was seldom around women at all while in India. I also had only a couple of examples of wonderful marriages, one of which was the base leader in Bangladesh. I often wondered if the couple of foreign girls I met in India and Bangladesh were somehow meant to be my life partners. Nothing ever came out of any of those meetings as they were definitely not relationships in any way. Now that I was faced with a clear case of destiny I had to begin to deal with my issues. After getting comfortable with being around Sarah, I invited her over to our apartment to cook for us and to do our laundry. In looking back that seems like such a stupid thing to do, but Sarah was such a willing servant that she always did it for us. In some ways, I thought it would

scare her off and that my dumb remarks would drive her away, but it had the reverse affect.

After a couple of months, we started considering marriage. We started reading a premarital counseling book together and tried to answer the questions honestly. We also talked to the Halls since they knew us both. We heard no objections from anyone nor did we see any sources of great conflict ahead. We met at her apartment some days, which was on the opposite side of the campus and close to her grandfather's house, to either talk about life or to jog together. Some time around Christmas we began thinking seriously about marriage. We met with several couples at Intervarsity who were interested in going overseas with missions and since some of them were already married we stayed afterwards and talk to them about it.

For Christmas that year I decided to take Dev home to see what a real Virginia Christmas was like so Sarah and I did not see each other during that time. It was also good for my mother and sister to meet someone from India, since Dev was the first Indian to set foot in my home town. We had a great time together and my sister was amazed at Dev's great knowledge of English vocabulary, which she did not expect. When I returned to Virginia Tech, Sarah and I became serious about getting married. I asked my mother about it during Christmas break and she said she would attend the wedding only if my father did not come. I called my father in Richmond and he said the same. That certainly made things interesting. Which one would we invite? The other bigger problem was that Sarah's parents were still in South Korea and were not coming home any time soon. It was expensive to fly so we did not expect them to quickly come over for a wedding at a moments notice. Since we were young we never thought of waiting a year or even months, as we only thought of days. Sarah wrote her parents weekly, so the turn around for a letter and a response was about a month or at best three weeks.

In our desperation, we decided the best alternative for everyone would be for us to elope. We had no money saved nor did we have to impose on Sarah's parents to help us from half way around the world nor deal with my parent's issues. For us both, it just made logical

sense. The only problem was that I had never met Sarah's parents nor had I ever talked to them. Sarah called her parents by telephone to find out what they thought but did not talk long as it was very expensive. We finally decided to do the deed on Valentine's Day 1983 as that seemed like a romantic thing to do. The only problem was on that very weekend, it snowed eighteen inches in Blacksburg. On Friday morning when I woke up I saw nothing but deep snow in all directions. I left a note for my roommates on our kitchen table that I was off to get married and started walking the two miles to Sarah's apartment. Before I left my apartment, I heard on the radio that cars were stranded all along the highway from Blacksburg to Christiansburg in the deep snow. With my boots strapped up and a couple of extra clothes thrown into my back pack I soon found out what I was up against. No one was outside and it was a struggle to walk in the deep snow as I was one of the first to do so. The roads were not cleared so I walked in the tracks left by a couple of cars which had already been out in the snow. When I reached Sarah's apartment in the middle of the morning, I saw a much bigger challenge in front of me. Her car was completely snowed in and I could hardly see any part of her blue Honda Civic under the white covering. I went up to talk to her about the snow and we decided, in our passion, to go ahead with our plans. It made no sense at all, but sometimes emotions have a way of overwhelming the obvious. I did not have a shovel so it took me a couple of hours to dig out her car using cardboard boxes to move the light powdery snow. We thought we would be fine as her car had front wheel drive and was light and easy to drive with her five speed manual transmission. We did not have to worry about other vehicles hitting us as no one else was stupid enough to be driving in such deep snow. By lunch I had the car backed out into the middle of the parking lot and verified that I was able to drive it in the snow.

As we left Blacksburg, we did not think about the court house in Christiansburg being closed due to weather, which was yet another case of our emotions getting the most of us. When we reached the court house we found the bad news waiting for us as it was closed. After all of this work and facing a huge disappointment, we made a really big decision. We had started out and could not turn back, so we

went on to Hotel Roanoke to spend the night. It may not sound like a big deal now given our current cultural norms, but at the time it was a great struggle for us. In our minds we got married that day, but we had to wait until Monday, February 14 to get the official signed court documents from the court house. To this day we celebrate our anniversary on the eleventh even though our marriage certificate has the fourteenth.

When we got back to Blacksburg and told my roommates and other friends, it was a dramatic turn of events. In the next month's Intervarsity newsletter they made a special section just for us to commemorate our wedding in the snow. We never really thought about where we would live either, but again my great roommates were very gracious and let us stay in my room. Sarah had been over many times to cook and clean so they knew her already, but this was a big step for all of us. By the summer, Mark calmly suggested we needed our own place and helped us find another apartment in the same complex. We avoided it as we did not have enough money for our own apartment nor did I want them to have to pay the rent without my portion. It all worked out for the best as they found a replacement roommate from China and we took over our friend Dev's apartment across the road.

We also did not know where to find affordable wedding bands so my mother suggested we use the same goldsmith she used for her remarriage who lived in Charlottesville. We drove up one weekend and were fitted for the custom braided bands and returned the next weekend to retrieve them. When switching apartments, I lost my wedding band in the bushes by our apartment as it was way too loose. Somehow I found it after looking for a long time with the help of Mark and Daniel and I decided it was probably a good thing to get the band tightened. Since that day, my wedding band has never left my finger as my knuckle expanded and I could not get it off even if I had to. I guess that means I am married for life to Sarah!

The first time we went to Dev's apartment after considering it as our future home, we wondered if that was a good idea. We visited a couple of times before, but it was only for very short visits. As we

looked around the apartment, we saw cockroaches everywhere. I made the mistake of moving the clothes washer and dryer to check for leaks and a flurry of roaches went in all directions. The most enlightening part of all was going into his roommate's bedroom. Dev had warned us ahead of time that it was a disaster. When we opened the door to look in, it was much worse than we ever thought possible. The whole room was covered with crumpled computer paper about two feet deep including some covering the bed, which in addition had clothes strewn all over the top of it. It all made sense why the roaches enjoyed living in that apartment.

We saw other cheap apartments around Blacksburg and Christiansburg but for the price and location it was the best we could do. One of the apartments we visited in Christiansburg provided endless entertainment for us and my roommates. When opening that apartment front door, a bathroom was directly in full view of the door. Not really a problem, but in this case there was no door on the bathroom. We laughed and laughed thinking about being caught on the toilet when someone came in the door and the first thing they saw was you half naked. Not a very practical apartment, but it was cheap but not cheap enough.

When school ended for the year, we moved into Dev's apartment for the summer and Sarah spent a whole weekend cleaning before we moved in. Filthy does not express how dirty the apartment was as even the kitchen had a thick greasy film on everything from their fried food. We loved Dev as a close friend, but that did not mean we liked his cleaning skills. When we finished moving our things across the road and gathered more furniture items from Goodwill, Sarah made it feel and look like a home. When Dev came over for a visit he was amazed at the transformation that Sarah had accomplished in such a short time.

I attended school that summer as I was behind in some of my electives. In the fall I signed up for French as my foreign language graduation requirement as I thought it would be a breeze since I had learned some French in Belgium. From the first day in class the teacher only spoke in French and by the first test I had managed to fail everything including all the homework with was written only in

French. I really thought languages would be easy for me since I had become fluent in Bengali and had learned some French and Flemish. This French class taught me that I was not a linguist. So during that summer I signed up for a whole year of Spanish taught in nine weeks. The class met three times a week with grammar lessons for one and half hours with one teacher and the second hour and half was to practice speaking as taught by a Cuban professor. They were both wonderful teachers and made learning a language fun.

At the same time I took an advanced Mineralogy class which had a three hour lab one night a week. On the night of the final exam I knew every answer and finished an hour early. When I got to the apartment, Sarah was not home so I had the brilliant idea to scare her for not locking the door when she went out. I went into the front closet and covered myself in a white sheet and left a crack in the closet door so I could see when she came in the front door. After waiting for thirty minutes, she finally arrived and I paused until she put the groceries in the kitchen and then slowly walked out into the living room, achieving the result of scaring her to the point of shaking. Not the high point of our marriage to say the least.

For the second semester that summer I went to Saltville, Virginia for a nine week field Geology camp that was required to graduate. It was hard being forced to be away from my new bride for such a long time. The sleeping arrangements were definitely not hotel quality nor were the evenings party time. After walking all day long, we spent the rest of the evening finishing our mapping projects. The camp was a single long building with a separate place for guys and girls to sleep. The instructor was from Washington & Lee College and he stayed in a small mobile trailer behind the main building. Every weekend Sarah drove the two hours from Blacksburg to pick me up so we could see each other. Each Sunday night was difficult as we knew I had to go back to the camp. I already know most of those who attended camp from my geology classes, but a couple of the people were from out of state. It was a beautiful place and I always enjoyed the daily walks in the mountains during class. I was definitely glad on the final day to have passed the course and to be back with my wife in apartment.

As the summer came to a close, we had to find another apartment as the lease was expiring. We decided to try for brand new low income housing being built by the town of Blacksburg. We were so happy when they accepted us as our monthly rent was based on our income which was nothing and so our it was set to be \$14 per month. It was a wonderful surprise to be able to live in a new place for almost nothing. There was no carpet in the apartment but only simple vinyl tile floors. We were on the second floor and on the day we moved in we met our Afghani neighbors below us. They cooked with so much garlic that our bedroom closet smelled of strong garlic each evening. It was not a hardship for us as they were the nicest people.

That fall as school started, we decided to help some newly arriving Bengali students get settled in the area. Through the university we found three Bengali fellows to help, one of which was married but his spouse had yet to enter the USA. They lived in an apartment complex next to ours so it was a perfect location for both of us. We helped them find furniture and showed them around the campus. For me, it was a dream to be around Bengali speakers again and to hear my favorite language being spoken. We spent every Friday at their apartment talking to them and generally having so much fun. Often the muted TV was on, but we were busy talking about every imaginable thing in life instead of watching it.

Our first Christmas together as a married couple was special as Sarah's parents came back from South Korea to see her grandmother in La Grange, NC. They were forced to put up with me since we had married without them being present. I decided to use some of the extra money I saved from our lowly apartment rent money to buy her an acoustic Yamaha guitar. I smuggled it under the clothes we stuffed into her Honda Civic so she did not know what she was getting. I knew she expected a romantic gift for our first Christmas together, but I thought I had done something great by giving her such a practical gift. It was not the last time I failed in my gift selection skills. Somehow her parents were graciously to me even though I was very dogmatic in my beliefs and was vocal about them. I also met her parent's best friends as we had stayed with them in Blackstone, Virginia for breaks on weekends to get away from school. It took time

for me to feel like I was part of her family as it was hard getting to know them from so far away but every little meeting helped.

At my final year of university life came to a close, I had to decide what to do next. I nearly had a minor in both Psychology and Computer Science and graduated with a minor in Mathematics and major in Geophysics. Many nights I stayed up all night long working in the computer labs along side the computer science majors. Most of them spent every night in one of the large classrooms in McBryde Hall, which was the closest access point to the mainframe computers. Each one of them set up a small area they claimed as their own with coffee cups, books and sleeping bags. They were given easy access at night to the computers for a quick turnaround on their computer projects, instead of having waiting during the day. I enjoyed every computer class I took but did not like the amount of time each one assignment took to complete. My first computer class required submitting computer cards that were read and then I returned later to see if they had worked correctly. My next class required me spending most of my time in a couple of labs scattered around campus with access to the mainframe computers on special green computer screens. This is where I frequently met many Indians who became close friends.

In my last computer related Geophysics class, I used the VAX computer in the Derring Hall Geology building. This had been recently donated by a major oil company and had software loaded on it called DISCO, which directly related to my future for the next several years. At the time I had no idea why someone would name their product after a bad form of dancing! Even though I enjoyed working with computers, I definitely did not like the endless hours involved. I applied to the graduate school in Computer Science at Virginia Tech anyway and was accepted. I was also accepted to attend graduate school at Texas A&M in Geophysics. I had to make a decision on which path to take and at the time I was convinced it was the most important one of my life. After talking to a fellow Geophysics student at Virginia Tech who previously attended Texas A&M, my wife and I decided to go to Texas, which was close to her brother who was working as a family doctor in Waco.

## 29. Oil Exploration in Houston

We did not take the decision lightly to move half way across the USA to Texas, but a degree in Geophysics normally led one to go west. Many of my fellow graduates went to New Orleans, Denver, Houston or Los Angeles as those were the hot spots in the oil industry. I already thought that if I did not like Texas A&M, then at least I would be close to either Dallas or Houston, which both thrived on oil. We did not have many belongings worth taking west, but we have enough things to load up a small rental truck with our Subaru station wagon in tow behind it. We drove straight west towards Kansas as my father was getting married for the third time. Before going to India, I drove from Blacksburg to Kansas City for twenty-one hours straight with two other friends. That was the last time I had been in Kansas so we considered it an adventure of sorts by going, but it was really just a stop on the way to College Station, TX. We stayed with my cousin Doug in Garnett, who I had always admired. He was a star football player in his home town and went on to play college football at Kansas State. He majored in graphic art, which was something I always wanted to do. I saw some of his commercial art projects while staying with him and they were awesome. We attended the wedding and met several of my relatives who I had not seen since I was a small child. We only stayed for the weekend wedding and then left for Texas, which was a straight shot due south.

When we reached Bryan-College Station, we did not have a place to stay so we got a list of apartments when we arrived. We found an apartment across the road from the university that suited our needs. The whole area was very flat and not the mountainous region we were used seeing in Blacksburg, so that was a disappointment from the start. As far as school went, my classes were interesting. My favorite class was Oceanography as my professor had recently come from Hawaii and was well known in his field. I took the class as I had no opportunity to study that subject while at Virginia Tech. I was surprised to be able to take that class in the middle of Texas that was so far from any ocean.

Within the first week I got a job managing the computer laboratory for the Geophysics department which was similar to one at Virginia Tech. My first mistake was when I moved the heavy pen plotter over a fiber optic cable and cut off the laboratory from the rest of the school network. I begged for forgiveness and retrieved a new cable from the main computer laboratory. Not a very good start for my school year.

My office roommates came even further distances to attend the school than I did. One was from Boston College and the other from State University of NY (SUNY). It was amusing walking around the campus with them as they had not seen ROTC cadets previously. There was a revered statue of the founder of Texas A&M that all cadets had to stop and salute as they walked by and my office mates always made fun of the statue as we strolled by. I was afraid that one of the cadets would get furious over the obscene gestures my companions offered to the statue, but somehow we avoided harm.

It was obvious that I was attending a football school as the stadium seated over 100,000 and dominated the whole campus. On Saturdays we heard the students yelling from our apartment which was about a mile from the stadium. The first week I attended an orientation where they taught everyone the official school cheers which they called "yells". Just another reminder that I was not in Virginia any more. For the football homecoming that fall we were able to experience the Texas A&M bonfire. We watched the huge empty field across from our apartments fill up with wood as large tractor trailer trucks unloaded stripped pine trees. At first we had no idea what was going on, but as I asked around we found out the student body was going to build a hundred foot fire form homecoming weekend. There was an art to stacking the pine logs as we observed the students in the evenings over many weeks before the big game. On the night of the fire, most of the 50,000 students gathered around the field for the big lighting after hours of cheering. It was a unique experience that was stopped several years later when several students died as the logs fell on them during the burning.

I found the Geophysics classes way too theoretical and I became disillusioned and started searching for jobs in Houston. In the meantime we met several Indian students to keep us entertained on the weekends and my wife found a job cleaning houses. She also had a job in Blacksburg where she watching small children for a Virginia Tech professor and her airplane pilot spouse. The job she had during our four month stay at Texas A&M turned out to be her last job outside of our home.

I did not know where to get a job, but I knew my time at Texas A&M was over. I contacted a friend who completed his masters in Geophysics at Virginia Tech, who was working in Houston. He got me a job interview and I was hired due to his recommendation. My job title was Geophysical Technician and I started at the first of the new year. Since we had a break between the end of the semester at Texas A&M and my new job, we decided to go to Germany for Christmas break.

My wife's sister lived there and our Indian friend Dev from Virginia Tech was also in the northern German port called Bremen. He joined the same group I had been with in India and was on the OM Doulos ship. It seemed like a perfect idea to visit them both and we used the money my wife had saved from her work for our big trip. We got our passports easily and our flights were booked with a couple of weeks to spare. I was also excited to go back to Germany as I thought it would be fun to go back with my wife to the same places where I had so much fun with Pradip five years before. The ship was docked far outside of the city, which is not what we expected. We finally found a hotel near the ship as we did not really have an address to give the taxi cab driver when trying to locate the ship. We were so happy when we finally saw the ship docked in the harbor with Dev waiting to see us.

It was like a family reunion for us, so we decided to celebrate and go to the center of town to see the Christmas festival. It was a festival of lights, food, and crafts with a huge merry-go-round carousel in the very center. I felt like we went back in time to a real traditional Christmas. After a couple of days, we said goodbye and headed south

by a day long fast train to Bavaria. My wife's sister was with a group called YWAM in a very small town called Hurlach. She stayed in a sixteenth century castle which the group owned. Most of the people left for Christmas break so we nearly had the whole castle to ourselves.

For our family Christmas Day celebration, we went to the apartment where some of the other YWAM girls stayed. They had a live Christmas tree with candles attached to the stems. We used matches to carefully light each candle one at a time. It was a wonderful Christmas tradition that we happily participated in. In the evening we all sat around and watched the "Gone with the Wind" movie in German. It was the first time I had seen that movie so I got a live running translation into English from my wife's elder sister.

We then decided to go to Füssen to see the same Neuschwanstein castle. It brought back great memories when I was with Pradip and Roger five years before, and I never expected to ever return to that location, especially as a married man. On the way back to the YWAM castle, we stopped to see the family I had stayed with the first time I was in Germany, as their daughter was at the YWAM castle with my wife's sister. Yet one more amazing turn of events that all fit together perfectly, which I could never have planned out on my own. It was a great vacation for our second Christmas as a couple and we were sad to see it end.

When we got back to Texas, I was eager to work at my first full time job at Western Geophysical and the fact that I knew someone who already worked there was a bonus. There were four other new hires who started the same day I did on January 1, 1985. I was on a team of four people and there was another team the same size who sat right next to us. We rotated to help each other as the work came in. The two leaders of these teams worked for several years as rough necks on oil rigs in the Gulf of Mexico and their constant cursing slowly wore me out. Besides the fact that the job was very repetitive and boring, after five months I decided to contact another classmate of mine who worked in Houston at a company that had an open programming position. I was hired for a new job at a company called

Cogniseis. It was the company which had created the DISCO program I had used at Virginia Tech. Since we had a six month apartment lease, I took a city bus for the thirty minute trip from western Houston to their office building located next to the Summit where the NBA Rockets played basketball. I left the Subaru with my wife so she had a vehicle to use while I was at work. In the summer we shifted to an apartment complex a block from the office, which was near Greenway Plaza. It was not the best of neighborhoods, but I was able to walk to work each day and we felt safe in our apartment.

There was a public softball field directly behind our apartments that came alive each weekend. We sat and watched the games from the bleachers. Some of the players were huge physically and every ball they hit went over the outfield fence. The games provided free entertainment for us. At the end of the summer, they had a tournament which revealed what we had been watching. We sat behind home plate and I often wondered why all the men never looked at my lovely spouse and few women were ever present at the games. Then the cheerleaders on the first row stood up to cheer and we realized they were all men dressed in women's cheerleader uniforms with pompoms in their hands. They also acted like women which greatly pleased the crowd who yelled loudly back. We realized we had been watching a gay league all summer long. That certainly explained why the men looked at me instead of my wife.

Next to the softball field was a cement basketball court where on the weekends, I played with anyone who showed up. It was fun practicing my dunking skills on the ten foot goal when the court was empty. The sport that kept us busy as a couple was tennis. Across the freeway from the park was a community called University Park which had well kept tennis courts. Since our Virginia Tech days we tried to play every day for at least one hour, so we kept that tradition alive by visiting University Park daily. It was a small expensive town within a huge city, and it had great parks. Our favorite park was only a couple of minutes drive from our apartment. It provided hours and hours of free fun for us as it was a sport we both enjoyed very much.

I started out as a tester in my new job. DISCO was written by a company called Digicon which still existed right across the street. They were a direct competitor of Western Geophysical. When I told my boss I was leaving Western for Cogniseis, I fully expected to have a job for the two weeks after my notice, but I was shown the door that day and was given two weeks pay. They each located new oil reservoirs so any little edge was worth keeping to themselves. I was shocked that my boss went from being friendly to an nasty so quickly. I learned something about business that day as it was not about personal feelings. I liked the people at my new job as they seemed much more professional than what I had seen on my first job. My job was to automate the testing since they had many different kinds of computers that had to run the same software and get the same results on each.

I visited the computer room daily and every new computer that came in had to be tested fully. Most of the customers used Digital VAX computers, but we had to make everything work on latest set of fast UNIX computers like Elix and Convex. My least favorite job was working on the IBM mainframe, which no one else wanted to work on, but it was just another computer to me. Because I floating around so much I became fast friends with the two developers who worked on the UNIX and IBM machines.

To this day, in all of our travels and the different places we have lived, I still consider Kent one of my best friends. He was the UNIX developer at work. It is one of those unexplainable things in life where you just hit it off with someone and no matter how long you have been apart, when you get back together it was like you were never apart. The real beauty was that his wife and my wife became close friends also. Over the years as our kids grew up, we can still fondly recall those early days together. Kent and I liked to play basketball so we worked on his old VW Beetle and played hoops afterwards on the rim that hung on his garage. We also went to the Summit to watch Hakeem Olajuwon's Rockets play against David Robinson's Spurs where we were friendly enemies for the night.

My other new found friend was John as we were the only ones who worked on the IBM mainframe. There was an onsite IBM

employee who sort of helped us. He was extremely filthy and his office reeked of cigarette smoke. He had a small portable TV next to his monitor where he watched shows while he worked on the mainframe. Computer print outs covered his office floor in random stacks, some of which had turned yellow from the smoke. Eventually the owner of Cogniseis had enough and told IBM he was no longer needed. That was when John and I started working full time on the IBM project. Since the smoked office was one of the larger ones with an outside window, I decided over the weekend to clean it up and use it as my own. Sarah helped me vacuum it and we filled it with a carpet powder to remove the disgusting odors. After getting permission from my boss, I moved into the office and felt like an important person with such a huge window office. The most interesting development related to this project was that Aramco, the national oil company of Saudi Arabia, was the first to buy DISCO on the IBM. When John and I demonstrated it worked correctly, Aramco wanted a full time employee located in Saudi Arabia. John did not want to go, so I volunteered gladly, with my wife's permission of course.

Some other life changing events happened before our Saudi departure. In our second year at Cogniseis, we decided to have a baby. It was a great event in our lives and a perfect place to start a family. There was a brand new medical center being built in Houston and we selected a doctor from the Methodist Hospital. A new pregnancy wing was finished just in time for us to have our first little one. The drive to the medical center was pleasant as we went through University Park and then eventually drove by the Rice University campus. The ancient Post Oak trees near Rice were beautiful as they hung over the roads and connected in the middle to completely cover the payment with shade. The birth of our first baby was special in every way as it was an unforgettable experience. The only bad thing about it was his size. He was too comfortable in the womb and did not want to face the world. He was the second largest baby in the nursery on the day he was born. There was a baby over eleven and a half pounds, but we were told that the mother weighed over 300 pounds. Clearly my thin wife did not come close to that, so our baby Nathan at ten and a half pounds was even more amazing to the nurses.

## 30. Working in India?

During the Christmas break after Nathan's birth and before the news of a job in Saudi, I came up with the brilliant idea to look for a job in India. We drove back to the East coast to show our new prize son to our families. I talked to my ex-college roommate, Mark, to see if he wanted to go with us to India. I talked to our previous Indian friends from Virginia Tech as well and arranged to meet both of their parents while we were in Calcutta. I thought it was the perfect time to go to India while we had a young baby instead of an active child who would crawl around and get dirty or sick. My wife was ready and willing to go see the land that I had constantly talked about for the five years I had known her. We also had a couple of Indian friends who attended University of Houston, but seeing them was not as easy as those in Blacksburg or College Station. It was an unpleasant freeway drive to get to University of Houston and the apartment complex they lived in was just about the worst thing we had seen. It was very old and run down and not a very safe part of Houston, so we did not relax and hang out in their apartment for long periods of time as we had done with other friends. All of our Indian friends were happy to hear of our plan to visit India. In January of 1987, we flew by Gulf Air through JFK and London to Bombay.

The only India I knew was the village and farm life with an occasional bus or train trip thrown in on the side. I wanted my wife and Mark to see the real India, so I planned our trip to see the parts I enjoyed the most. We arrived in Bombay and stayed with my friend Pradip's family near Marine Drive. It was the first time I met Pradip's mother and father and they were the most kind and generous people ever. One of my team leaders from Maharashtra met us and he enjoyed holding Nathan as if he was his own child. We took a whole suitcase full of disposable diapers with us to India. Even though we had used cloth diapers in Houston to save money, we just did not see how we would manage in our travels with cloth ones. At least we had Mark along to carry our bags for us, so that was a good idea having him along!

Through Pradip, I located a man who was starting a computer business who was willing to see me, but when I saw him in his office it was more like a closet than a real office. The man was barely able to pay rent in the fancy Air India building so had no reason to hire me. I had every intention of finding a job to move to India, but that was not a very good beginning to my job search. Somehow I managed an interview with the Chief Geophysicist at ONGC, which was the national oil company of India. Their office complex was near the airport, so I went by a taxi and it was the completely opposite situation. It was the largest and fanciest office I had ever seen. He was very gracious to see me but he admitted that they did not use Cogniseis software and that I was too young and inexperienced to help him. He asked me why he should hire me when there were plenty of Indians with more experience than myself. It was a tough question, but it made me realize that my job hunting in India had abruptly ended before it even got started. Those were the only two contacts I had arranged ahead of time and I had failed at both of them. It was very discouraging for me. We looked around Bombay for a couple of days and saw the Gateway to India and inside the Taj Hotel. We then took a thirty-two hour second class train to Calcutta. I wanted both of them to experience the trains as that was the real India to me. Of course having a baby along just made my wife all the more tired as it was not easy for her to get him to lay down and sleep, so that was the start of her bad experience in India.

Exhausted, we arrived in Howrah train station and nothing had changed since I was last there. We got a taxi and crossed the amazing Howrah bridge on our way to stay with the family of our Virginia Tech Indian friends. We soon discovered they lived right next door to the Tripura Palace. They lived on the top floor and were clearly the richest family I had ever met in India. Their driver chauffeured us around Calcutta and insisted we see the Tagore shrine, which I was more than happy to finally see. We also visited the Botanical Gardens and saw the world's widest tree, which is a Banyan tree about one mile in circumference. We also saw a huge collection of bamboo which was the largest I had ever seen. We saw several peacocks roaming around and it was a relaxing time walking around the gardens as it did not feel

like we were in an overcrowded Calcutta. On the way back we stopped to see the Victoria Monument, but it did not compare to the Banyan and bamboo trees we had just seen.

It was our next part of the trip that I finally realized it was not a good idea to bring my wife and child to India for the hardship reunion tour. Our host family arranged for a special video coach bus from Calcutta to Ranchi, Bihar. It was the latest in luxury, but for us it was nothing short of torture. This ultra modern bus had a TV mounted on the ceiling near the driver for all to watch the latest Bollywood movies. That was not a bad thing except for the fact that we were on an all night long bus ride and the TV turned up full volume all night long did not help us sleep. Our Calcutta hosts thought they were doing us a favor since it was all the rage to ride on a video coach. We got very little sleep that night. The reason we were headed to Ranchi was to meet our best friend Dev, who was teaching at IIT Kharagpur and he agreed to go with us to Nepal. I also arranged to meet my best Bengali friend in the world, Yudhisthir, in Ranchi. We had a wonderful visit while my wife tried to catch up on her sleep. Because Dev was wiser than I was, he decided we should fly to Kathmandu instead of taking a bus. It was a good decision, so we took the short flight on Indian Airlines from the Ranchi airport. As we flew we saw the Himalayas in the distance and Mount Everest was clearly visible.

We spent a couple of days in Kathmandu looking around Patan and the temples in downtown Kathmandu. We went to see the Bodnath temple after climbing the many steps up the top as monkeys sat along the path watching us. Mark and I went to see the temple as my exhausted wife with baby Nathan sat in the taxi with Dev. Somehow I missed visiting this temple when I had been in Kathmandu previously. At the base of Bodnath were the burning ghats where people are cremated, so we went to see that also, just so Mark could experience it first hand.

My real mission was seeing Pokhara again, so we jumped on a morning bus and left Kathmandu through the foggy foothills of the Himalayas. I did not remember how small the bus seats were as the typically Nepali was half my height it seemed. My knees hit the seat in

front of me the whole way and with every bump the pain increased. It was not an enjoyable ride, but the scenery could not have been better anywhere else in the world.

We found the best hotel I could have asked for in Pokhara as it was within walking distance of the bus station and half way to the Pokhara Lake. From the back of our room we had a full view of the whole Annapurna range. A national tourist center was near the hotel so I gathered as many posters as they would give me, which I still have to this day. On our second day in Pokhara, Mark and Dev decided to walk to the top of the one of the hills in Pokhara to get a better view of the Himalayas. I decided it would be best not to leave my wife and try to patch things up since she was quite unhappy with me at that point. We took a walk around Pokhara Lake and got an amazing photo of the Himalayas reflecting off the lake. I was sad not to have experienced the adventure with Mark and Dev, but just to be in Pokhara again was a dream come true for me. It was hard to leave as I just wanted to stay there forever and gaze at the world's highest mountains. We headed by bus to the Indian border on one more knee knocking ride. The scenery was wonderful as I had not seen that part of Nepal during the day. The blue green water was rushing down the valleys and the Himalayas were always visible in the distance. A fitting end to our Nepal trip.

Our next tourist destination was the Taj Mahal as I wanted Mark and my wife to marvel at the marble monument's beauty. We were not disappointed as the weather was perfect. There was bamboo scaffolding on one of the minarets to clean the marble but that just added to the uniqueness of the visit. This time I closely inspected the buildings on each side of the Taj Mahal as the red sandstone mogul style buildings fascinated me for some reason. As we walked around the grounds, there were hundreds of wild green parakeets all over the grass lawns, which just made the experience all the more grand. Our flight home left from Delhi, so we took a train from Agra to spend our final few nights in the Indian capitol city. I did not get a chance to see much of Old Delhi previously, so we decided to go the Red Fort at night. We also looked around Connaught Place on our final day and found a Lebanese restaurant that was by far the best non-Indian food that ever entered my mouth. It was a fitting end to our trip, but at this

point my wife was so tired after nearly a month of traveling that all she wanted to do was go home. We bought a couple of wool carpets and some wooden inlaid wall hangings and we happily got on a plane to return home.

When we arrived back home, we learned that our neighbor below us had died while we were gone. We knew he had been sick before we left and in looking back I am sure he had AIDS as he had all the symptoms of that disease. He committed suicide and had hung himself in his apartment. In a way I was glad we were not there for that event. Our neighbor across the hall was a professional photographer, so she took our best photos and blew them up and framed them for us. We still have those wonderful photos on our living room wall to this day. It was only a few short months before we moved to Saudi Arabia as that was my secondary plan if I did not find a job in India.

## 31. Saudi Arabia

It was a big deal when we chose to move half way across America from Virginia to Texas, but it was huge to leave for Saudi Arabia with our year old son. My wife's parents had permanently moved back to USA from South Korea in time for their first grandchild and now we were taking him half way around the world. I must say that it was not the best way to impress the in-laws. What made matters even worse, relatives visiting Saudi required special permission and airline tickets were not cheap to that part of the world so we did not expect any visiting relatives. At the time it seemed like the right decision since working in the Middle East was natural for someone trained in Geophysics. After my wife agreed on the move, it required detailed preparation. I was indirectly helping my employer so it was a mutually friendly separation. The CEO of the company came to visit me a couple of times to make sure everything was going smoothly as he wanted me to succeed, but the visits were never personal.

Aramco was an acronym for Arabian American Oil Company. It had a fascinating history that changed the world in the 1930s. When I joined there was still a partnership between Texaco, Exxon, Chevron and Mobile with Aramco. Many of the employees working in oil exploration department were temporarily from these parent companies. I was the exception to the rule in many ways. Normally you were not allowed to join Aramco with less than five years professional oil experience and I only had three. The division head at Aramco had to formally agree to my joining Aramco, which he did willingly since they desperately needed my help. The negotiation was fairly easy since Aramco had a huge office in Houston, but it took all summer long to complete the move details. My wife and I had to take physical medical exams along with AIDS tests. Aramco had a policy against anyone with serious medical conditions entering Saudi as they did not have the facilities to handle them and absolutely no one was allowed in the country with AIDS. The physical tests took all day long and were the most thorough medical exams we ever had. We had hearing tests in a sound proof room. We had complete eye exams unlike I had at my

yearly optician visits. The doctors performed balance tests. Both of us had to pass all the physical tests or I was not be able to go, but we both passed them all.

As the day neared for our departure, we were given an inventory sheet where we were to document every thing we were shipping to Saudi. We had been warned that if we did not document it and they got lost or broken, then we would not be reimbursed for those articles. We were also told that we had to list every item in great detail. By the time we were done we had over twenty pages of itemized belongings and we really did not think we had much stuff in our small two bedroom apartment. We were told it would take around three to six months to receive our goods, so they gave us one refrigerator size box that we filled up with temporary articles which we were to receive within three to six weeks. Movers came to pack all the things we had documented and we checked them off our list as they packed them. We really did not have many valuables as we got rid of the most things when we moved to Texas. We recently bought a large Sony Trinitron TV at an estate sale in University Park, but we were not allowed to take televisions, so we gave it to our best friends. Our sofa was not worth keeping so we donated it to Goodwill and other than those two things, everything else went with us. We had been told of other things we should not take into the country, like nonprescription medicines, movies with any female skin showing, any magazines with pictures of women or alcohol in them. They said all movies, books and magazines were going to be reviewed by custom's officials and if any objectionable content was present, we would loose them and not be reimbursed. We were allowed to take one Bible per person into the country with us but absolutely no religious propaganda was allowed. What at first sounded like fun and an adventure of a lifetime was turning out to be a list of do and do nots that kept growing.

The packers took two days to complete the job of perfectly placing all of our belongs into boxes. On the second day we left our apartment and checked into a luxury hotel provided by Aramco which was our home until we left for Saudi. We had a couple of orientation days about Saudi culture, Islam, and the history of Aramco. It was very exciting to be in the final stages, knowing we were due to leave

soon. It also helped that we were staying in a five star hotel with a wonderful hotel pool and daily all-you-can eat food buffet. When the day finally arrived for our departure, we flew KLM business class from Houston to Amsterdam where we refueled before leaving for Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. All the new Aramco employees sat in the upper deck on the 747 and we sat next to a family we became friends with during the week preceding the flight. They also received special permission to join Aramco as they had five children which was two over the normal limit. There were only a couple of houses available for non-Saudi families of this size, so their house was prearranged over several months. He was going to be one of the head geologists, working in my same building but I would not work with him directly. It still helped to know someone before we arrived.

We stepped off the plane around midnight and as we walked down the steps onto the tarmac, I turned and told my wife that the air blast from the jet engines was extremely hot. Little did I know that the hot air I had just experienced was to be an every day occurrence during the summer months for the next two years. Our only son was not yet one year old when we arrived so we were both exhausted from the sixteen hours of plane rides. We had the front most seats as the plane had a special bassinet where we laid our baby son to help him sleep comfortably. We took turns trying to doze instead of holding our squirming son. We just wanted to go to bed when we stepped into the small Saudi building next to the plane, but as we entered we saw a sea of people waiting to get their passports cleared. There were thirty plus people in each of six lines, except the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council) line which had just a couple of people. Most of the people present were either Indian or Pakistani laborers, but I was really too tired to care to talk to anyone.

After finally clearing the line and thinking we were nearly finished, we entered another non A/C room with a sea of luggage and many long tables where custom officials were opening and checking every bag. We found our four bags on the side of the room and stood in another line wondering if we had anything they would not like in our bags. We were fairly certain we had followed all the restrictions given to us in Houston. The custom official took out everything in

each of our bags and the only thing he did not like was our VHS video tapes. He took all of them and said they would review each one and we could come back in a week to pick them up. So we finally survived the airport and left the building after a couple of hours. As we left the airport building we got another blast of super hot air as we found a taxi to take us to the Aramco compound. We had been given a few Saudi Riyals to cover the taxi to our new house of which we only knew the address. At 3 a.m. we reached the house but did little exploring of the house and just fell asleep quickly from exhaustion.

### **Aramco compound**

It took us a while to discover what was available on the Aramco compound. Our house was on the back side of the compound, as far from my work as was possible. My boss lived right next to the office and walked to work each day. The compound was a five mile by five mile square area. We lived close to the mechanics shop, which had a clear view of the US airbase across the empty fields and a super secure barbed wire fence around it. For lunch I always went home by bus since it only took a few minutes to get home. My wife enjoyed seeing me as a way to break up her day and to talk about what we planned to do in the evening. There were around 10,000 people living on the compound with less than half being Saudis. In the past, only foreigners lived on the compound and the women enjoyed driving and moving around freely, but that time was clearly in the past. When we went to the pool for a swim, most women did not mind wearing bikini swimsuits. If Saudis brought their kids for a swim, then they did not mind looking at the barely clad women. Something my wife never got used to nor did she enjoy going to the pool.

For eight months out of the year the weather was perfect with few visible clouds in the blue sky and the temperature was around 75. The other three to four months were indescribably hot and humid. I expected the heat but the humidity in August and September was unbearable. One time I played tennis on the compound at night under the lights when it was 117. I lasted only one hour before I had absolutely no energy left. It was the last time I played tennis in Saudi

as I stuck with indoor basketball in A/C instead. There were a couple of schools on the compound for elementary and middle school kids, but after the ninth grade all youngsters had to leave the country for schooling. It was a wise rule as teenagers were definitely prone to get into trouble and the way Aramco dealt with the problem was to send them out of the country.

There were three security gates through which we left the compound. The main gate was where all workers entered the compound but residents could come in and out of the other two side gates. The two main office buildings were at the main gate with security gates blocking the road into the residential areas. The company mosque was right outside the office buildings and a smaller one was near our house on the back side of the compound. Every morning I had to go through a scanner and security gate to get into the office complex. There were twelve foot high steel bars embedded in concrete barriers all around the office buildings. The barriers were added due to recent national bomb threats. Even though the Iraq-Iran war was in full swing, just a hundred miles away, we felt very safe. Due to lack of daily news we were barely aware of a war going on so close by. The only indication of war was during lunch every day a group of F17 US jets flew overhead on training sessions. Short wave radios and satellite dishes were illegal, so the only news we received was by word of mouth or the limited local TV stations.

One of the Saudis I worked with took me downtown to buy a TV soon after we arrived, as he knew where to find bargains. There was no cable TV in the Kingdom, so we had to buy an antenna and get it installed on the roof. There were only three TV channels available at our house. The Saudi station started broadcasting at 4:30 p.m. with a long reading from the Quran by the King who was called "The Custodian of the two Holy Mosques". The weekly Aramco newspaper listed the show times for the TV channels. We also received the Bahrain and Qatar TV channels. Every Wednesday night the Bahrain TV channel showed an Indian movie, which I watched weekly by myself as it normally started at 9 p.m. and ended at midnight. The TV did not provide much entertainment for my wife but did provide some

relief for our son. The weekend was Thursday and Friday in Saudi, which took some getting used to.

There was a grocery store on the compound but the selection was very limited and my wife liked going downtown to the local grocery store which had a better variety. Since my wife could not drive off the compound, she went with other women on a company bus to the local market near the entrance. She normally waited for me to take her downtown after I got home from work. The problem with waiting for me was that all the shops throughout Saudi closed for thirty minutes during the five times of daily prayer. There was an illegal sheet that we all had that showed us what time the daily prayer occurred. If prayer started when we got to Al-Khobar, then we had to sit in the hot car waiting for the prayer time to finish. We planned our visits around the evening prayer times. We did not want wait in the hot weather with our young son in the car. A couple of times we walked along the Gulf while waiting but the sand was crusty with salt deposits from the saline water and was not an enjoyable experience. It was hard for my wife to depend on me for everything. We bought a four wheel drive Subaru station wagon from someone who was leaving Saudi, so I left the car with her so she could drive around the base if she wanted.

Some weekend nights we got a Filipino nurse to babysit for us so we could watch a movie at the Aramco theater or go downtown for a Thai, Indian or Chinese meal. Some weekends we went down to the Aramco beach. We liked to go the back way as we frequently saw large camel herds in the road. Often the road was covered with sand from the wind as the large dunes constantly moved around, but we never got stuck. I always asked my coworkers if the way to the beach was safe as it was closed to traffic sometimes due to sand covering the road. The beach was a great break as we took a meal with us as it was an hour drive for us one way. The lack of waves and the salty Gulf did not make beach activity fun like at American beaches. Some days we were not be able to go into the water as the sea was full of Man of War jellyfish, but we did not know the beach condition until we got there. Aramco had a marina for boat owners only, which had a much nicer beach but we never joined as we did not have a boat. It was always odd to me to see the Saudi women going into the water covered head

to toe in their black abaya with black gloves on. I wondered how hot it must have been in the grueling summer months for them.

The office building where I worked was over two miles from our house. A company rented tourist style bus stopped right outside our house each morning at 7 a.m. so I enjoyed the A/C for the short ride to work. In the summer months as I stepped off the bus to go through the tight security post the hot blast of air made my glasses immediately fog up. It was hard to see and by the time I walked the hundred yards to the office, my shirt was soaking wet with sweat. I immediately wondered what I had gotten myself into as we had arrived at the hottest and most humid part of the year. Within a month I got another wake up call. After entering the Expec building where I worked with other exploration based employees, I saw a group of religious men gathering around an Indian man on the open area between our building and the Admin building next door. One of them had a long stick and started beating the man. One of the Saudis I worked with told me to look at the Quran tucked under arm of the priest as he beat the man forty times. He also told me he had heard the Indian laborer had been caught stealing a pair of scissors as he cleaned our office building. It was one thing to hear in orientation about such things but quite another to see it in person.

I worked with one American who lived in Saudi for eighteen years and never drove a vehicle inside Saudi. When I asked him why he never drove, he told me he did not want to take a chance. He was fearful because of the Saudi law where if you were in an automobile accident with a Saudi who was killed, then you were put to death also. The old eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth law was applied in modern day times. We learned over time to always avoid the central mosque in downtown Al-Khobar on Fridays as that was when they enforced these laws. We learned about this when a group of Bedouin men came into Al-Khobar and robbed a store. We never read about it in the newspaper or on TV, but all of my Saudi coworkers knew about it. They said a couple of the tribal men had been caught and one of them was getting his head chopped off and the others were getting their wrists cut off. It sounded like a fable to me that they made up to amuse me except they were serious and I was not laughing either.

Later on I heard from my fellow Filipino friends that one of their friends had been caught in his home in Al-Khobar leading a Bible study. As punishment he had been put into prison for five years and after serving his time he would be deported. The big problem was that the Saudis do not feed their prisoners so my friends had to go to the prison daily to feed him. They said the conditions were horrible inside the prison. Before we left Aramco for good, we heard an even more shocking story. One of the women at the church we attended lost it mentally one day and posted a notice on the mosque outside the Expec building that Muslims had to follow Jesus or be doomed to hell. That did not go over very well with the religious police who found her and put her in the mental ward at the compound hospital. She was deported after a month which was almost the same time we left and her husband volunteered to leave on his own soon afterwards. That was the extent of trouble we heard about while in Saudi.

There were some lesser mishaps that we witnessed though. After all the warnings we received in orientation in both Houston and Dhahran, there were still some who liked to live on the edge. One of my British coworkers lived with his nurse girlfriend, even though they knew the penalty for adultery according to Sharia law was a stoning for both of them. I guess they assumed as long as they did not bother their Saudi neighbors, they would not get in trouble. The most shocking event for us while we were in Saudi was when the couple with five children that came over with us got divorced. What made matters even worse was that it happened during a family vacation. One of the other couples who went over with us were on vacation with them in Nevada. After an affair between the man with five children and the other spouse, they decided to get a divorce and remarry in Las Vegas during the same vacation! As a result the mother and her five kids had to leave Saudi when they returned from vacation. Maybe he lost all common sense from making too much tax free money from working in Saudi. Maybe he accidentally drank too much of the brackish water that ran in all the household pipes. It is hard to say why someone would do something so stupid to his whole family.

Another sad story was about my fellow American boss who was drunk every time we saw him outside of the office. He lived near the

library and we sometimes saw him staggering along the road either going or coming to read books. That was odd behavior since alcohol was forbidden throughout the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, except on the Air Force base next to the Aramco compound in a highly guarded bar. When the Americans first found oil for the Saudis and the Aramco compound was built, each house came with a still to make alcohol and a special room with a drain in the floor for the employees to make their own beer and wine. The older houses, like the one my boss lived in, had the still room but our new house did not as that had been banned many years before. He was by far not the only alcoholic we met on the Aramco compound.

Some of the people we became friends with in Saudi enjoyed their life, but we never felt at home in Saudi. Before we left America for Saudi, we went to see a family in Blacksburg who had worked with Aramco and were considering returning to Saudi. We got in touch with them through the church we attended while at Virginia Tech. They told us about a couple of families to meet when we got to Saudi. They attended the only authorized church in the Kingdom, which was on the Aramco compound. The church met in the middle school gymnasium, which was the same place we played basketball. One of the families had a daughter the same age as our son so some weekends we got together with them. Both of these families had been in Saudi for many years and they were best friends. They had souvenirs of their many years of roaming in the desert. One of the families had many sand roses (large gypsum crystals) the size of volleyballs next to their front door. They liked to go camping in the desert and found the minerals during their excursions. The other family had an eight foot by six foot pure silk Persian carpet hanging on their wall. They bought it before the Shah of Iran was overthrown and such rugs became illegal to take out of the country or to take to the USA. It was worth more than \$10,000 at the time and was the most beautiful carpet to look at while eating supper in their dining room. They knew a family in Ras Tanura who invited us for a weekend of snorkeling in the Gulf, which was fun. The Gulf was very salty but clear blue. As we went out one hundred yards from the beach, we saw the bottom of the Gulf about twenty feet down. There were huge fish swimming below us, but none

scary enough to make me panic. Our host had an extra pair of prescription goggles or else I would not have been able to snorkel and see anything.

As we discovered, the longer people stayed in Saudi, the more unusual they became in their habits and what they valued. The most unusual case was the man who hired me who got the special approved needed from the high ranking Saudis for my employment. About half way through our time in Saudi, he became a Muslim so he could stay in the country as long as he wanted. He owned two huge vacation houses – one in Ozarks in Arkansas and the other in Florida. I never knew whether he retired to one of them or sold them and stayed in Saudi as I lost touch after leaving Saudi. One of the Geophysicists, who I worked with, had a brand new 968 Porsche in Cyprus which he kept up on blocks all year long except for the couple of weeks every year when he went home and drove it around the island. That seemed extravagant and wasteful to me. A neighbor across the road, who I worked with, had a spouse who was addicted to Dr. Pepper. She drank a case every day and they bought a soda fountain dispenser to fuel her addiction! She was definitely wound up whenever we met her, but that was to be expected from the high daily sugar intake. Most of the Americans played golf on the compound as there were two full eighteen hole golf courses. To simulate grass they used different thickness of oil applied to the sand. A small one foot square piece of Astroturf was used to hold the ball except on the “greens” where the ball was left on the sand when putting. They also had sand traps which did not have any oil on the sand at all. There were a couple of Pakistani men who raked the sand after anyone played the hole and took care of the course. That had to be the most horrible job imaginable as they were out in the burning sun all day long during the summer.

One of the strangest things for us was getting used to lack of green colors. Even the artificially watered trees on the Aramco compound were dirty from the constant dust and sand. During the two years we were in Saudi, it only rained on two days, but that was not enough to clean the trees. The first day it rained, all the streets were like rivers and the huge wadi behind our house filled up with water.

The water came within an inch of entering our house. Then just as quickly as the rain came, the water all disappeared in the street and wadis. We had grass on the front and back yard which required a daily brackish water bath to survive. I only remember a handful of days when clouds were visible. Every time we went back to Virginia and North Carolina for vacation, we thought we entered a jungle as everything was green and the colors were normal instead of being washed out from the brightness of the Saudi sun.

One exciting day around noon a hundred yard high dust storm blew in from the West. We saw the wall of sand approaching in the distance and had been told to make sure the house was sealed shut if such an event occurred. As the sand wall moved over the compound, the sand was so dense that it blocked out the sun and it appeared to be dusk outside. After an hour the storm passed and we saw that sand somehow came through the cracks around the windows and covered the inside of the window sill.

One of the best things for me was getting to know the Saudis at work. Many of the foreigners had many years of oil industry experience, so they had walled window offices. On the other hand I had a small interior cubicle. I did not mind as it forced me to get to know the Saudis in our area. My first year was mostly spent helping the highly educated research Geophysicists in the Research and Development department to making sure their every need was met. I helped maintain the DISCO system which they used to process the seismic data in new and creative ways. Everyone else in my area worked with the production processors who used Western Geophysical software.

The second year was a big switch as the name of the company changed to Saudi Aramco. It was a landmark event since the Saudis became the full owners of the company. It also meant that the temporary employees from the four major parent oil companies had to slowly turn over their work to Saudis and then return home. I was assigned two Saudis to train as my replacements. We became fast friends as I already knew them personally, but now we began to work

together daily. After leaving Saudi, one of them visited us in America while they were on vacation.

One Saudi coworker lived down the road from us and we rode the bus together to work every day. He was extra special since his spouse was one of only four working Saudi women at Aramco. She had a doctorate in petroleum engineering and worked on same floor we did. She was the only Saudi woman I ever talked to, as the three of us discussed the latest news on our ten minute daily bus rides.

Another Saudi at work was super religious and I liked talking to him. He was quite liberal when he went to school in America but that experience somehow turned him into a very strict Muslim. We had friendly arguments about Christianity as I enlightened him on the tenets of my faith. I always let him try to convert me to Islam so we could depart as friends since I had to work with him!

One Saudi returned to our department after receiving his doctorate in USA. He was an albino which caused him to have serious vision problems. Since he was from the royal family, he received special treatment. I found him very pleasant to talk to and to work with, not what I envisioned of a royal snob. He had to use a screen magnifier to read the text on a computer. He was the most intelligent person I met while in Saudi, but his sight definitely slowed him down.

The most interesting Saudi of all was a radically liberal fellow whose father had died after becoming an Aramco Vice President. I think because his father had been so important the other Saudis put up with him. He never wore the traditional Saudi thobe and ghutra but instead he mostly wore blue jeans and T-shirts. He was more western in his thinking than I was. He was the one who took me downtown to buy our first TV. That event was a shocking experience for me as I saw him fly into a rage when an Indian worker pulled in front of him with a small trash truck in Al-Khobar. The manual laborer finally pulled over and was thoroughly cursed out in both Arabic and English. I could not believe how my Saudi friend transformed into such a hateful person so quickly as he was the most laid back of all the Saudis I worked with. When he got back into his station wagon, I asked him what that was all about. He told me that all Indians and Sri Lankans

were lower than dogs and he hated them all. It was interesting how he left off the Pakistanis in his remark since they were fellow Muslims. He also had a bad habit of going to either Amsterdam or Thailand two times a year to be with prostitutes for a couple of weeks. The reason I knew about it was he was very vocal to everyone at the office when he returned as he bragged about the women he had slept with. The odd thing was that it was not looked down upon.

I only met three other Saudis outside work as we played together in our biweekly evening basketball games. Two of them were twins who lived in the special executive section of the compound as their father was a senior Vice President at Aramco. They described the inside of their house to me since I was not allowed to go in their house. All their sink faucets were gold plated and the floors were solid marble, which was shocking for me to hear as I did not know such houses existed on the compound. One of them played on my team and came to our year end party, which was quite unusual. He did not drink alcohol, but how he described his desire for freedom was shocking. It was a side I had not heard before, as it was never mentioned again after that event. Other Saudi coworkers shared the same thing when they visited us in America, but they knew when they returned to Saudi they would follow the socially acceptable norms.

Being in Saudi for Ramadan was always an event. Most of the foreigners saved up their vacation so they could leave the country during the monthly fast. No one ate, smoked or drank in front of any Saudi while at work or anywhere during the daylight hours. Some of the foreigners with walled offices who stayed in the Kingdom, closed their doors all day long. My alcoholic boss often smoked in his office even though it was banned as he so addicted to cigarettes. He told me one time that he never smoked nor drank before going to Vietnam. The Army supplied free beer since clean water was lacking and that made him an alcoholic. He was a chain smoker as well and just could not give it up for a whole work day during Ramadan. People were not very pleasant to work with during the month long fast. It was quite a contrast to living in Bangladesh, which was also a Muslim country. During Ramadan in Bangladesh, the restaurants opened all day long and pulled down a thick black cloth so no one saw inside from the

street. In Saudi every food shop closed from dawn to dusk as no food was allowed at any time.

## **Another child**

Sometime soon after arriving in Saudi my wife became pregnant with our second son. She decided to stay with me in Dhahran instead of returning to America as some women did. There was a hospital on the Aramco compound and she chose to have a midwife deliver the baby. We walked on the paths around the compound for exercise and occasionally she went to the women's weight room, which was next to the swimming pool. Our favorite time to walk was in the evening right before sunset as that was when it cooled off. There were some slight hills on the compound which helped us keep fit. We were wondering what we would do if our new baby came in the middle of the night, so we arranged for friends to come over to watch our other son. Sure enough, at 3 a.m. she started feeling contractions and since our first child was so large at birth, we did not want to wait long. We immediately called our friends and I drove her to the hospital which was only a couple of minutes away. A Scottish woman was assigned as her midwife and unlike with our first borne, I was not allowed to be with my wife on the all women's floor to see the birth. It was not a fun activity anyway, but I was disappointed I could not be next to my wife's side for such a big life event. Later she told me that all the Saudi women were screaming loudly on the floor whereas she was a good American woman and took the pain silently. Our new son was three pounds less than his older brother but almost the same length.

The hardest thing was when my wife came home as she did not have any relatives to help her take care of the kids while I was at work. Our new arrival had serious colic problems and every night for the first month cried loudly when we laid him down in his crib. We took turns rocking him all night long to get him to sleep. We were both very tired for that whole month. The news got worse a couple of months later when we discovered he had a condition called Strabismus, which was the medical term for severely crossed eyes. We decided on our first vacation, to have his eyes operated on in Greenville, NC with an

ophthalmologist that my wife's father knew. The surgery went really well but he looked pathetic with an eye patch that covered most of his face. We decided to have the other eye operated on in Saudi at the Aramco hospital. Both of the surgeries were a success and he has great eye sight to this day. Eyes were a topic of conversation at work since the Russian doctor who invented RK surgery lived in Riyadh and several of my coworkers had him correct their vision surgically. I thought about it at the time but after seeing everything we went through with Daniel eyes, I decided I should leave my eyes alone.

## 32. Saudi Sports

Living in Saudi was a man's world. I fit into the culture perfectly but my wife did not have such a great time. I took it upon myself to play basketball as much as I could to keep fit and trim. I even volunteered to run the basketball league for a year to relieve a fellow coworker who was the past president and a teammate of mine. Basketball became an addiction for me and somehow my wife was gracious enough to let me do it. I played two nights a week at the middle school gymnasium and once on the weekend. We always had a good crowd on the week nights so we played full court games. Those who played were a couple of Saudis, a couple of Filipino men (who ran the Aramco security guards) and occasionally a couple of the Marines (who guarded the American Embassy immediately outside the Aramco compound) besides the American Aramco employees.

When league play started, two more teams from other Aramco compounds came to Dhahran to play. By far the best team was from Ras Tanura as they had a six foot eight inch fellow who was very good. The guard on that team was the starting quarterback for Stanford when he was in college and was the best Aramco all round athlete. I did not enjoy playing them as a team as I was always elected to guard the tall man and he made me look like I never played basketball before. There was another team from Abqaiq who traveled from the oil refinery town to Dhahran twice a week.

During the pickup games, I was always assigned to guard the best shooter in Dhahran, who had played semiprofessional basketball in New Mexico. He considered it an off night when he failed to score fifty points and I thought I did well if I kept him under forty. We got in many heated arguments over fouls and some games were a battle between the two of us while everyone just watched us fight it out. We were enemies on the opposite teams but Robert liked me when I was on his team as I was a great rebounder and would retrieve the few shots he missed. Because of my skill he decided to let me join his traveling team, but only when he really needed me to win a game.

We played all over the Eastern Providence in tournaments which we always won. I had never won medals in sporting events until I met him. He was so serious and never wanted to loose, which was the same mentality I shared as we were both very intense on a basketball court. The big difference was that I wanted to play as a whole team and all he wanted to do was shoot and let everyone else rebound. One time we played a tournament on the Aramco compound and both the Saudi Junior National team and the US Air Force team came. Somehow we beat them both, which was a shock at just how good we could be when we all played at our best level. After that event, my wife proudly cut out my photo in the Aramco newspaper and put it on the refrigerator. Another big event occurred when Meadowlark Lemon brought his All Stars to play against us to entertain all the Aramco employees. Meadowlark did not play much, but the people he had on is team were really tall and played in major USA colleges. We had no hope of winning but we enjoyed the time as they entertained the crowd with their high flying skills.

Around the same time I was asked to play with the Filipinos in their own tournament. They lived in a series of dormitory buildings right outside the main Aramco gate. They could not get in the residential part of the Aramco compound, but I was able to go freely into their building. One of the Filipino players on our team was an ex-professional player named Ulysses. He drew large crowds every game he played. I also enjoyed watching him play as he made playing look so easy as he could score on anyone and do anything he wanted on a basketball court. He had a great personality and everyone liked to be around him. He played in front of thousands in the Philippines but in Saudi he played mostly in front of his Filipino coworkers. Somehow we lost in the finals but no one cared as they got the chance to see the great Ulysses play in person. I thought it was fun to play in front of a crowded gym with every Filipino in Dhahran cheering and yelling over each play.

Later on, our mostly Filipino team went to play in the Al-Khobar indoor stadium for a tournament and my team members decided it was my turn to score a huge number of points. Since the Filipino way of playing was to run fast breaks constantly, I fit right in with their style.

When we played the best Saudi team we ran them to death. They fed me the ball on every fast break and for every shot, so that I scored sixty-five points that night. The stadium was really huge but only a few Saudi men were in the stands to see the big occasion. I did not really care as it was the highlight of my basketball career. The best thing that happened that evening was the other team had a seven foot Saudi who had played somewhere in the USA in college. He got very angry with me when I blocked one of his shots as he fully expected me to let him just make the basket. It was the only time I played someone that tall and definitely the only time I was able to block someone's shot who was that much taller than me. Truly a night to remember.

One of the tragic events that happened during that time was my basketball enemy, Robert, was known on the whole Aramco compound for his excellent beer brewing skills. The way we became friends was an interesting story. One day he was boiling a huge pot of water for brewing beer on his kitchen stove and he slipped on the floor in his sandals and accidentally spilt the boiling water on himself. I am not sure how he explained what he was doing to the Saudis, but they rushed him to the hospital. He received second and third degree burns all over his chest and one of his legs. He was in the hospital for over a month in the burn unit. I felt really bad for him and went to see him a couple of times in the hospital. After that we became good friends but we never played basketball together again as we left Saudi soon afterwards. He did not have many friends since he was so demanding on the basketball court but I had sympathy for him as I knew that is what I would want if I were in his place. He deeply appreciated me coming to see him.

### 33. Saudi Travels

Some people worked in Saudi only for the money and hoarded their Riyals for retirement. For Americans making under \$75,000 it was completely tax free, so just the amount saved from not paying taxes was a bit boost to our income. A perfect example of those who saving money were the manual laborers from India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. They did the work no one else wanted to do and lived frugally in downtown Al-Khobar apartments. I rarely saw them since they were treated as the lowest class possible. When we were in the Saudi airport, we saw the poor laborers with their tiny briefcase size suitcases and their well worn clothes entering or leaving Saudi. I heard they saved nearly all of their money to send home.

There was never any mention of a caste system in Saudi, but there was definitely an unspoken class structure. Royalty lived extravagantly above all others. The King's summer palace was between the Aramco compound in Dhahran and the town of Al-Khobar. It was only used when the King visited his brother in the Eastern Providence. The palace grounds were around one mile square and it had huge walls and even bigger gates which we saw when driving to the local market.

At the time we lived in Saudi, there was no unemployment as every Saudi had a job either running their own business or working for the government. All the Saudis working for Aramco were given a free plot of land at one of two locations right outside the Aramco compound front gate. Our Saudi next door neighbor was the Vice President of Mechanical Engineering. He was waiting for his house to be finished on one of these free lots. He shipped in Italian marble for all the floors in his house. He proudly showed me the huge house one day when he gave me a ride home from work and we took a slight detour outside the Aramco compound front gate. It was indeed an amazing house with a huge spiral staircase leading upstairs with the brownish white marble floors and gold fixtures quite the sight to behold. He told me that his four wives all wanted something special for the new house, but he was required by his religion to buy them

something of equal value as not to show favor to any one of them. Even though we lived right next to each other, I never saw any of his wives but he told me he had two Saudi wives, one Ethiopian wife and one Filipino wife. I really wondered if the last one was a wife as normally the Filipino women were house keepers or babysitters. Maybe she started out that way and became a wife over time. He told me one of his Saudi wives was beautiful and he would take her on social outings. The other Saudi wife bore him two children and was a great cook. The Ethiopian wife was good at watching the kids. It made me thankful that I only had one wife as she did all of these things for me like a super woman and it was all I could do to treat her the way I should!

Some people worked in Saudi just to travel and see the world. The Aramco library was a decent size, and by far the largest collection of books were in the travel section. It seemed like everyone I worked with was either planning their next vacation or talking about the one they just returned from. We were required as foreigners to leave the Kingdom of Saudi every year for at least six weeks. Aramco paid for a round trip airfare to your original destination on Business Class every year, which in our case was Houston. We received the money for this ticket but it was up to us how the money was spent. I knew some people who always flew Business Class, but we did not. We used the money to make side trips to visit friends and we still had enough money for a coach flight home as well. Most of the people I worked with went to Europe each year to see a different country and kept track of all the countries they visited. Several of our friends had been on an African safari, been to Egypt, Australia and went to Hong Kong to buy furniture. I thought traveling was fun, but not for the sake of traveling as we liked to visit friends who lived all over the world. The interesting thing about traveling on vacation was that Aramco kept everyone's passports in a huge vault in the basement of the Admin building. You needed a visa to enter Saudi and a visa to exit Saudi and you paid for both. There was a large collection of travel agents in Al-Khobar which was a healthy business. One of our friends traveled all around the world each year on their trip home to America so the travel agents were always happy to see them.

## **Hong Kong**

Our first vacation was spent in Hong Kong during Christmas. We went to see my wife's sister who had moved there from Germany. Few people stayed at Aramco for Christmas as that was a favorite time to go on vacation, which was a close second to leaving during Ramadan. We heard a lot about Hong Kong from friends who loved to shop, but we saw a different side while staying in a YMCA guest house, which was more of a dormitory than a hotel. We were there to let my wife's sister marvel at our year old son and seeing Hong Kong was a bonus. We flew on Cathay Pacific, which was known as one of the best airlines. The service was wonderful and we only had to endure an eight hour flight with our squirming son before landing. The arrival was interesting as we dropped over the hills and came to a screeching halt right before the runway ended in the sea. Quite an experience for the first time but for those who frequently traveled to Hong Kong it was nothing special.

Our YMCA hotel was on the Kowloon side right off Nathan Street, which was also our son's name! The room was nondescript, but it was very conveniently located near a group of well known restaurants. It was also a short walk to catch the Star Ferry over Hong Kong Island where my wife's sister lived. We had only a week's vacation saved up, so we thought of exploring Hong Kong together so we did not waste time. We went to the top of Grand Peak, saw Stanley Market on the far side of Hong Kong Island and spent a little time shopping in the huge Harbor City Mall, which had a large Toys-R-Us in the basement. Grand Peak was the top most point on Hong Kong Island with a panoramic view of both sides of the island. We went to the top by a small tram that climbed the steep hill. It was an astonishing view of the huge skyscrapers below which lined the bay. The other direction towards China was even better as you could see Stanley Market below, but mostly just islands floating in the blue sea in all directions. The next day we went to Stanley Market by tunnel through the mountain to get the best shopping deals. It was far from the downtown malls and expensive stores but was just the kind of shopping we liked. As we moved around Hong Kong, it seemed as if

everyone was dressed up. The men all wore suits and ties and the women wore dresses with high heels. It was like a young people's fashion show. Quite the change from casual clothes everyone wore at Aramco and what we were used to wearing in Texas. I did not know if they had more money in Hong Kong or just wanted to look well groomed and appear to have money.

While my wife spent quality time with her sister, I decided to take a trip to China. One of her American coworkers was fluent in Chinese and he offered to take me across the border to see China. We took a train north through the rural New Territories district which was very different from the huge skyscrapers we saw everywhere. We saw mostly rice paddies and a few small houses beyond the railroad track communities. At the China border I made sure I did not get a China stamp on my USA passport as Saudi refused reentry if I had one. Hong King supplied a special pamphlet style booklet just for tourists going to China. Once we crossed through the ancient red Chinese gate border crossing, the whole world changed. It was a huge contrast to the high life of Hong Kong. The drab boring buildings were run down and made with gray concrete. Instead of the suits and dresses, the men and women wore pant suits in shades of gray or drab blue. The streets reminded me of India as people were walking everywhere and the buses were full, but without any luggage on top as was done in India.

We decided to hike for a while and to see the small city from a nearby peak. As we looked over the city, it was boring without any color and distinct uniqueness. The money was more exciting than the view as I must have gotten twenty different kinds of bills in our short trip. I had local money, government money, and tourist money just for foreigners, and it all looked like play Monopoly money. We looked around a small village as we went down the mountain and we talked to several small children attending school. We made sure we were not seen as we did not want to get into trouble for talking to the locals. After a full day of looking around, we had to leave as we did not have permission to spend the night in China. Our time in Hong Kong ended shortly thereafter. We brought a good supply of toys and said goodbye as we headed back to Saudi, our dry dusty place we now called home.

## **Singapore**

My best friend left India for his wife's pregnancy and was living in Singapore, so we decided to visit them for a week. We heard plenty of stories about the cleanliness of that country, so we looked forward to the green lush countryside in the equatorial country. We took Singapore Airlines which was just as great as our flight to Hong Kong. The city was as clean as we had heard it was. The initial hotel we choose was not a good location, so we shifted to the far end of Orchard Road where most of the tourist hotels were located. We had a great time visiting our friends and while the women talked about babies, we talked about deeper things like theology and our current books reading. We ate at a different place each night as the whole area was full of restaurants and hotels. On one trip down to the opposite end of Orchard Road my wife found a cheap Chinese porcelain seat that she wanted. We bought it and I then found out how heavy it was when I carried it a mile to our hotel. My arms felt like they would fall off by the time I got to the hotel, even though I frequently stopped to rest along the way.

We heard many good things about the Singapore Zoo so we had plans to take the kids to see it. On the bus trip to the northern part of the island we saw hills covered with orchids of all colors and sizes. The kids had a great time at the zoo and we marveled at how green everything was, as it appeared to us as a dense jungle. The whole zoo was covered with trees and was nestled in rolling hills. All of which was wonderful after being in flat dry Saudi. The trip was over before we knew it, so we left our friends not knowing where we would see them next.

## **Turkey**

Our final vacation out of Saudi was to see friends from my home church in Staunton, who had moved to Turkey. I met him in Germany on my way to India and told him I wanted to see him one day in Turkey. He had the most beautiful Armenian girlfriend with him in Germany. They were engaged to be married and were in a similar situation as I was in at the time. They did not know if they would get

married but assumed so at the time. His fiancée was unlike anyone I ever met as she was like royalty in Turkey. They both told me that it was painful for her to be in Turkey as she was constantly bothered with marriage proposals. She received at least two every day. Mostly because of her beauty and her well-to-do family. It was like a vacation for her just to be outside of Turkey. Something had happened in the meantime and now David had married someone else. We met her for the first time when we arrived in Istanbul.

We arrived in the spring of our third calendar year in Saudi. David agreed to show us around the city as he was fluent in Turkish and at the same time we talked and renewed our friendship. He also told us the places to see on our own for the rest of the week. We visited them in their home and ate with them a couple of times, but we stayed in a fancy hotel in the center of Istanbul. It was the most expensive hotel we had stayed in as it was \$230 a night. It was hard finding a good hotel as they were either cheap and rundown or too expensive, so we chose the later.

Turkey was by far my favorite place to visit as a tourist. I loved the architecture of every mosque we visited. I longed to see the Blue Mosque, known locally as Sultan Ahmed Mosque. I had seen many photos of it and we saw the tall minarets from our hotel several miles away. Once inside, it was worth every minute staring at the nearly four hundred year old mosque which looked drably gray blue on the outside but was a feast of colors and patterns on the inside. Nearby was the Hagia Sophia mosque which I had read about in college art class. It was fascinating for a very different reason. It was really a museum rather than a place for Muslims to pray as the five hundred year old mosaics of Jesus on the entry ways were still visible. It had a ragged history of switching hands many times from Christianity to Islam and back, but instead of destroying the historical jaded past, it was all preserved in this one building. It looked old as the paint was starting to peel from age, but it was not less grand than the Blue Mosque. We looked around that area and found a couple more mosques that were not as old but were just as magnificent in the use of color, patterns and designs.

By far our favorite place of all was the Topkapi Palace. It had a unique history also as it was originally built by a Byzantine sultan and was still used in the Ottoman empire. There were so many styles visible around the palace grounds but I liked the blue inlaid ceiling and the ornate embedded stones in the marble, which reminded me of the Taj Mahal but on a smaller scale. Originally there were thousands of people living on the palace grounds so it took us a while to walk the whole area and we occasionally took in the picturesque views of the sea from the palace cliff. The Topkapi Palace was switched to a museum when the Ottoman emperor built the Dolmabahce Palace which we visited the next day. It was not nearly as interesting as it was like a European palace, which was boring compared to the sites we had been seeing.

To end our time in Istanbul we went to the Covered Market and looked around at all the different small shops. There was so much to look at and so many stores, it was easy to get lost for hours. There were shops with nothing but the classic Turkish blue and white plates and vases. Another shop sold copper and brass pots and plates. Another sold maroon and black rugs. It was tourist heaven, but we just enjoyed looking as we strolled with our sons around the inside of the market.

On our final weekend in Turkey, David suggested we take time to see Izmir to the South. There were so many things to see in Turkey that it was hard to decide, but he helped arrange a taxi driver who drove us there and then we flew from there to Ankara and back to Saudi. I was so thankful for David helping us to see what he considered as his country. A pleasant thing of note was how in our many taxi rides throughout Istanbul, the drivers always asked for the correct payment. There did not charge us the tourist rate and never asked for more money. They were always enjoyable to talk to even if they only spoke broken English. It made the trip more fun as we did not have to fight over money even though we did have the white tourist skin.

Our ride to Izmir was a time of rest as we had walked so many miles in Istanbul that it was pleasant to sit and let our feet take some

time off. It took us all morning to drive the three hundred miles through the Turkish countryside. Before we reached Izmir, our primary purpose was to see Ephesus. Before turning on the road to Ephesus, our driver told us we had to see the Temple of Artemis as we were going right by it. We also had to stop and see the tomb of St. John, which was not a whole lot to see other than a small glass plate over a hole in the ground that was supposed to be his grave. We were glad to continue on to the real destination of Ephesus!

It was one thing to read about this city in the Bible and another to literally see it. We walked the same path as St. Paul had done almost two thousand years before. The same mosaic path was still visible as it had been preserved from being buried in sand long before, as it was a port city located in a bay. The famous Celsius Library was still standing, or at least the columns on the front of the building were intact. The Ephesus Theater had a seating capacity of over 40,000 people and was where the Bible spoke of the huge crowds attacking Paul. Ephesus had some of the best preserved ancient ruins in the world. It was amazing to walk the streets and look at the parts of the city so well preserved. In the evening our driver took us to downtown Izmir where we spent the night at a hotel within walking distance of the downtown area where a fair was going on. It was a pleasant ending to a wonderfully memorable vacation.

## **Trips back home**

We made a yearly pilgrimage home to see our families in America, but the trip back was not much fun. It was two separate eight hour flights and everyone recommended breaking up the trip. On our first trip back, we stopped and spend the night in London as we flew British Air. Most of the Saudi travel agents had a deal where you spent one night free due to the layover times in traveling from the Middle East. We had to switch airports from Heathrow to Gatwick so we chose to stay near Hyde Park so we would be close to downtown London. This trip was a big deal as we had two children now, which meant we each of us had a child along with luggage and we had to switch airports. We wanted to see London but we had to sleep first as we left Saudi around

midnight and it was 9 a.m. by the time we reached the hotel. We took a quick nap to slightly recover and then took a subway ride into London to look around. I had the great idea to find the Metropolitan Tabernacle where C.H. Spurgeon used to preach over a hundred years before, as I loved reading his books. We got very lost and never found it but we did accidentally walk right by Westminster Cathedral. It was worth getting lost to see it. It looked Gothic but was built within the last one hundred years. We walked by Buckingham Palace but we were too tired to care and went back to the hotel to get a good night's sleep. We decided that sightseeing on trips returning home was not a very good idea.

The next year we decided to go through Amsterdam as we flew on KLM. It had been seven years since I had been in Schipol airport on my return trip from India to America. On the midnight flight we all fell asleep on the nearly empty 747 airplane as we had the whole row of five seats to ourselves. When we woke up to the daylight coming through open windows, my wife and I looked around and could not find our oldest son. We had laid both of our sons on the floor between me laying on one set of five seats and my wife behind me. Our youngest son was still on the floor next to me, so it was suspicious that only one of them was gone. We looked all around that section of the plane in a panic state and finally we found our other son on the floor several rows back as he had rolled under the seats in his sleep.

Since we learned our lesson from the previous trip home, we decided to stay in a hotel in downtown Amsterdam and just rest. We took a train from the airport to the central railway station. Somehow I got turned around and thought the hotel was near the train station and we started walking in the wrong direction. I had already been shocked to see women wearing super short miniskirts in the airport, but that was nothing compared to what our small children saw that day. I showed them the quaint canal boats on the left hand side of the road and then when I looked to the right I saw we were in the red light district. This was not like the slummy red light districts I had seen in Bombay or Calcutta, but these were well maintained ornate houses with solid glass fronts for everyone walking by to see the girls available for hire. Not exactly what I had in mind for the family to see

as it was a huge contrast to the austere conditions in Saudi where women were covered in black from head to toe. Now we were seeing house after house of women clothed in underwear if that much. They were our welcoming committee back into western culture. Once we arrived at the hotel we only looked around the immediate area, slept and then caught a taxi to the train station and back to the airport the next day.

## Home

Every time we returned to North Carolina or Virginia to see our parents, it was good for them to see their grandchildren, but tiring for us. My wife had a list of stuff to buy that was not available in Saudi, so it was a constant flurry of buying stuff. We knew we had a weight limit on the return baggage and that we had to switch flights and airports so the more luggage we took the more painful it would be. There was a huge new toy store outside Dhahran which kept the kids supplied with entertainment, but there was nothing like real American toys from Toys-R-Us. It would have been great to take some real meat back with us as the Australian meat in the Saudi grocery stores was just about the toughest thing ever, but alas we took no food products back with us.

I always played basketball in rural North Carolina for a change of pace. It was fun to walk into a gym with all black young men and then show them that I could run and jump and play basketball even though I was white. At first they never wanted me to play and I just warmed up on the sidelines, but when a game opened up I walked on the court and told them I was playing. There were always a couple of guys who tried to dunk over me. Sometimes I blocked their shot or just held my position and they would miss, to which everyone in the gym would go wild with excitement that a white guy could play basketball. It was fun and I looked forward to it every time. From castes in India, to social classes in Saudi, to prejudice in the South USA, human nature is not a pleasant thing to behold sometimes but it can be overcome.

## **34. Oil Reservoirs in Houston and Austin**

After my two year basketball party, my wife gently suggested that it was time to leave Saudi. I really liked living in Saudi and having enough money to travel to see friends all over the world. I also enjoyed playing basketball. My favorite thing was getting to know the people I worked with, who were mostly Saudis. However, I knew all the while that it was very hard on my wife. It was not fun for her when we went downtown and the men looked her over. It was not fun for her to be totally dependent on me for everything. It was not fun traveling with two small children for endless hours in an airplane. I was thankful for women's intuition as we left eight months before the Gulf War started when Iraq took over Kuwait. It was three hundred miles from Dhahran to Kuwait. Some of our Aramco friends stayed through the Gulf War even though the scud missiles flew into Saudi. It was a very stressful situation and I was glad we did not have to live through it. If it were up to me then we would have, but I listened to my wife and we left at the end of 1989.

In Saudi I worked with the IBM representative on occasion and through him I found a job at the IBM office in Houston. Knowing I had a job waiting for me, we left Saudi in time to reach America for Christmas time. Shortly after arriving in Houston we found an apartment right before a big ice storm hit. We felt twice as cold since we had not been in such cold weather for the last two years. Even worse the storm knocked out power for much of the city and all the water supply to our apartment building. The centrally located laundry machines for the apartment complex were all inoperable with frozen solid water lines. The pond in the middle of the apartments was an ice skating rink. We never expected such freezing weather so far south in Texas.

Since my adopted grandmother died and left us an inheritance along with some money we saved from Saudi, we did something we have never done since. We bought two new vehicles, a car for me to drive and a van for my wife and our always expanding family. The rest of the money was used for a down payment on a house in the Spring

Branch area of Houston. We picked that particular location since it was an old established neighborhood close to my office and near to the oil company corridor off the Katy Freeway. I wondered how I would like working as a technical representative for the marketing and sales department, but I was really thankful that they gave me a job and thus we were able to leave Saudi with sound employment. I did not enjoy wearing dress suits with ties but I suffered through it for a whole year. IBM released the RS/6000 workstation that year and one of my prime responsibilities was helping Chevron port their code to work on this new desktop computer. I knew a couple of people at Saudi Aramco who used the predecessor called the IBM/RT with good success, so I volunteered to work with this new technology. I previously worked mostly with large IBM mainframes and sometimes Cray supercomputers so this was a big change for me. The biggest change of all was working on programs using X-Windows and OSF/Motif. From that point on I have almost exclusively focused on the front facing part of computer programming, which is the part that people see when using computers.

### **Big change again**

After a year, it was obvious that I did not belong in sales and marketing as my strengths were in development. On the other hand, I liked directly interacting with customers and trying to solve their individual problems, so it was a tough decision for me. I started looking for a new job at the wrong time as we were due to have another baby around Christmas time, but I decided to hold off until the baby was born to get the great health insurance benefits at IBM. I tried to find a job within IBM but no development work was being done in Houston as most of the RS/6000 work was in Austin. The birth of our third child was special as he was born on Christmas Eve and was a wonderful Christmas present for both of us. The hospital was right across the freeway from our house and for my wife it was not the ideal place to spend Christmas Day, so she came home the following day to happy children waiting for her.

The decision to look for a new job came up again as the new year arrived, but this time I wanted to make sure I had a stable job to support our new arrival so I was cautious. I found an advertisement in the Houston Chronicle for a brand new startup company near our house. I knew exactly where it was located, as we drove by it when visiting the Indian shops. They needed help porting their existing code to an OSF/Motif style program, so it seemed like a perfect match. They had an office on the top floor of the five story building, so they were not a financially struggling startup, which I fully expected. I took the leap and never looked back. I joined as the ninth employee in a branch of the oil industry working on oil reservoir modeling, which was new area for me. It was exciting for me to work in a high energy environment where we had to make real customer deadlines. It was a bonus that 3D modeling was involved and that the company primarily used high end Silicon Graphics hardware. I had seen the 3D OpenGL demos on the IBM RS/6000 workstations and was fascinated by them. We used them to verify the 3D hardware was working properly on our new machines. The 3D demos were written by Marc Andreessen of Netscape fame when he was a summer intern at IBM.

We had the best times in the office. We hung a small Nerf basketball goal on the outside of a glass walled office to play “horse” when we needed a break. We also played football in the halls by trying to pass the ball from one end of the hall to the other without hitting the ceiling. Since we were in Texas we did our recreational activities while listening to Stevie Ray Vaughan full volume. As the company grew we eventually moved into a bigger space in another building and it had a huge outdoor balcony on which we played football. Occasionally the football went over the side and one of us went down to retrieve it from the grass lawn below. When we wanted to play it safe we went downstairs and played in the parking lot instead. Since the testosterone was flowing freely, our whole goal was to see who threw the football the furthest. It drove us further and further back until we covered the whole parking lot. It was always a challenge since the bottom floor of our building was an upscale bank. They did not appreciate us throwing a football in their well kept parking lot. Once the original founder turned over the company to a high profile

executive, I no longer enjoyed the new set of problems that came with the transition, so after three years with the company I left.

It was a hard decision for me to make as we had our fourth son while I worked at this company and we had moved further out to Katy, TX to a large house with a bigger yard. The first house we bought had a great location as they were just building a new loop around Houston and it was very close to our house. It was easy for us to jump on the freeway and get to any part of Houston. We had our final son in the same hospital as our previous son, right across the Katy Freeway from our house.

We bought our first house for only \$60,000 and we did not have any problem selling the house because of the location. Another reason for leaving Spring Branch was that our neighborhood was being vandalized weekly and my wife did not feel safe living there any more. When our next door neighbor's house was broken into, we decided it was time to leave. Someone got into their garage and then crawled up into the attic and dropped down into the house by breaking through the ceiling. That seemed a little too daring and several others on our street had similar stories to tell.

About the same time a monsoon like rain storm hit Houston and many of the underpasses around the city filled up with water. My wife got stuck trying to get home after picking up our oldest son from his private kindergarten school. I had to leave work early to save them from the ever rising water just a couple of miles from our house. The water entered the engine intake valve and the engine immediately seized up. It was not her fault as the water rose quickly under a bridge and she got caught under it. The insurance paid to have the van engine replaced so we were off the hook for a large bill.

## **Silicon Valley**

I found a job working for Silicon Graphics (SGI) in their Houston office, which meant I still got to work with previous coworkers but in a supporting role. It was quite the roller coaster ride to see the company change from the outside looking in. Each company had their own set of problems as well as good qualities, I quickly found out. The

two people I worked with in the SGI Houston office were super intelligent and had written some of the original OpenGL code for my previous company's main product. I clearly felt inferior to them as I worked really hard but they were on a whole higher level than me. I took several trips to the SGI Mountain View, California headquarters for training and met the rest of the people on our support team.

One of the OpenGL classes I attended at the SGI office in Mountain View was very entertaining. I learned all kinds of interesting tricks and tips in the class and every evening I went to a new part of the valley to amuse myself. The first evening I drove to Big Basin Redwoods State Park. It was only twenty miles away but it took me over an hour to get there. The narrow meandering road into the park was a dramatic change from the constant traffic jams in the valley below. I enjoyed just the drive to the park. As I got closer to the state park the trees kept getting taller and taller and the road weaved around the large redwoods. I walked around the park for a couple of hours until the park closed but I did not want to leave as I loved staring at the huge unbelievable trees. On the way back I drove to Los Gatos to eat at a California pizza place which my class instructor suggested was worth the drive. It was some of the most unusual pizza dishes I ever saw but once I got over the shock of the ingredients, they tasted good as I selected different ones from the buffet.

On the next day I decided to see Santa Cruz as one of the fellows I worked with lived there. He told me to go to the Fisherman's Wharf and eat a wonderful fish sandwich and walk along the boardwalk area. To get there I decided to go to Half Moon Bay and then drive down scenic Highway 1 to get to Santa Cruz. I stopped several times along the way to walk down the huge cliffs to the Pacific Ocean below. I had never seen cliffs on the beach and only seen such sights in tourist photos. It got dark as I arrived in Santa Cruz and found the wharf easily and the fish sandwich was just great as I was told. Each morning the class instructor asked me where I had been the night before as he knew this was my first trip to the area.

On the third evening I decided to drive to Monterey, which was over an hour each way, that was if I got out of San Jose in a reasonable

time. There was a seafood restaurant I was told to visit in the middle of Monterey. I also wanted to drive through Pebble Beach to see the famous golf country club. It was all as gorgeous as I was told it would be. I had a slight delay getting out of San Jose, so it took me two hours to get to Monterey. Seeing the wild deer walking on the golf course and the pelicans sitting on the rocky shore was worth the long drive. I was going to drive further south on the Pacific Coast Highway but in the interest of time I returned to my temporary hotel home. I also considered driving up to San Cruz but it was getting dark and I chose to drive back to the valley by the freeway. I drove part of Highway 1 to see the sand cliffs which were just as impressive as those closer to Santa Cruz.

On my final free night I saw the San Francisco Bridge and then Muir Woods. I was not dressed appropriately for the bridge overlook as the wind off the Pacific Ocean was freezing even though it was in the middle of the summer. I enjoyed Muir Woods but it was more of a tourist spot than Big Basin which I assume was because it was closer to the freeway. In the evening as I returned, I decided to stop and see the Presidio of San Francisco and eat at an Indian restaurant that I was told was good.

For the final day, I had a few extra hours to spend before my 11 p.m. red eye flight back to Houston so I drove through Cupertino on a pilgrimage to see the Apple headquarters. I drove up through the hills behind Cupertino and found some amazing gated houses nestled in the hills. I eventually found the Skyline Boulevard, which reminded of a smaller version of the Blue Ridge Parkway. On the way back down into the valley I got lost and accidentally drove into the Woodside neighborhood, which was the home of Steve Jobs, so it was an Apple kind of final day in Silicon Valley. It was clearly one of the best business trips I ever had. I made one more trip to Mountain View for an SGI celebration for reaching \$2 billion in revenue, but I did not have any free time to explore more of the valley on that trip. It was not disappointing as I felt as if I had seen almost everything I wanted to see on my special first trip.

## **Austin**

After a couple of months, the founder of my previous company decided to return and take over the company he started. He decided to sell the company and as part of the deal he returned for a year and took the company to Austin. When I heard about the deal, I agreed to return and go to Austin with the company. I heard great things about Austin and thought it would be a great place for the family. I also had a cousin living in Austin so we would be able to see them whenever we wanted to. The best news of all was that if I quickly rejoined my previous company, then they would buy our Katy house and pay all the costs for our move. We originally got a great deal on the house as it was about 2800 square feet and we only paid \$86,000 for it. We tried to sell our house on our own to get more money but on such short notice we did not find a buyer. Rejoining my old company was a deal I could not turn down so I quickly gave my notice to SGI and returned. My boss as SGI was quite upset with me, but for me it was more of a personal family decision than a business one. I failed to express this properly to him, but I fully understood why he was so angry with me.

We moved into an existing office building which was occupied by employees of the company which bought us. We decided to live in the South part of Austin since the building was right off the freeway below Austin. We lived in an apartment for a month while we looked for a house in our price range. Houses in Austin were considerably more expensive than Houston, which was known for the cheapest houses available for such a huge city. It was sticker shock for us as we looked around and saw the price of houses. We finally settled on a new house in Buda, which was south of Austin on I-35. It was easy for me to jump on the freeway and in a couple of minutes be at work off the first Austin exit.

Life was really good for us in Austin as it was not super humid like in Houston, so we felt like going out more and exploring the area. I took the older boys on weekend trips into the hill country, which they always enjoyed. There were several waterfalls around Austin which they wanted to see. We found a park near Driftwood which had a swinging rope out into the river, which the boys mustered up enough

courage to try. We also had fun visiting places like Guadalupe, Perdernales, Enchanted Rock, and McKinney Falls State Parks. All of which were easy to reach on a weekend day trip. By far the favorite repeat location was the Barton Creek Greenbelt as it was very secluded and was a series of shallow pools that the kids loved to sit in for hours. It was a bit of a challenge to get to, but it was worth it each time. As a whole family, we often met my cousins in Zilker Park near Travis Lake in downtown Austin as it had a large fun playground that the kids liked to climb on as I chased them. One of the all time most memorable places we visited was Hamilton Pool Preserve which had a shallow pool of large fish that the boys tried to catch. We also climbed around the edge of the cliff so they could stand under the fifty foot overhanging waterfall. There were other more tourist friendly things in the area like amusement parks at Fiesta Texas, Six Flags in Arlington, Astroworld in Houston, and the best water park in the whole world at Schlitterbahn. Looking back maybe we had too much fun!

The biggest news for us in Austin was not the fun we were having on the weekends, but that we had our last child while living there. The really special news was that we finally had a girl after five tries. At first we did not want to know whether it was a girl and a boy, since my wife knew she would be disappointed if it was a boy as she really wanted a girl for the last one. It was a hard decision to wait and see at birth. A boy would be familiar as we had plenty of practice with the four we had already and we had plenty of spare clothes around the house. In the end it did not matter as we had a beautiful baby girl and we made sure no more babies would unexpectedly show up in the future. The bad news is that a few weeks before she was born, I came down with pneumonia and was totally knocked out. On the day our daughter was born I had no interest in going to the hospital as I did not have the energy for it. My wife insisted I go as I was in no way contagious and she wanted me to be there. When I saw the birthing room I was happy to see a full recliner waiting for me and I climbed into it, put my feet up and went to sleep. As our baby girl was being born, the doctor told me I needed to get up and come over to see her being born. Somehow I mustered up the energy to stand up, went over for the final couple of minutes and then went back into the chair to

sleep. My wife was yet again very forgiving, but she was disappointed I did not have enough energy to see our final child's birth.

## **Texas beaches**

In the twelve years we lived in Texas, we visited every public beach on the Texas coast. Some were better than others. Galveston was the closest beach to Houston as it was an hour's drive away. The retaining sea wall was not the most beautiful tourist attraction and there was a small public beach that was always crowded. There was a state park to the south of the city which we visited a couple of times for a weekend picnic lunch.

We drove to Freeport to explore the beach area, only to find an oil refinery was nearby as there was a reason the beach had few visitors. One of the fellows, who I worked with, had a brother in Victoria who suggested we go to Matagorda Island as he heard it was a good place. It was hard to get to it as the island was in a remote part of the state. It was near Port O'Connor, which was a tiny town compared to the huge metropolis of Houston. It was a clean beach with small sand dunes, but as in most beaches in Texas there was nodules of oil all over the beach. We heard it came from the offshore Gulf of Mexico oil derricks, but none of the drilling rigs were visible from the coast line. The oil was annoying as it got on our feet and was hard to remove. Port Aransas was another stop on the Texas coast line, but as in most beaches in Texas cars or trucks were allowed to drive on the beach so it was not a good experience with kids.

One of our best experiences was a camping trip we had on Mustang Island off the Corpus Christi coast. That beach was the first one we found in Texas with clear non-oily sand and which had no vehicular traffic on it. The drive was a bit long with all the kids, but it was worth it to see such a wonderful beach.

The final beach we visited was on South Padre Island below Corpus Christi and everyone told us it was the best beach in Texas. It was a long drive through the King Ranch to get to the beach next to the Mexican border. We picked the wrong weekend to visit as it was spring break and it seemed as if every college student in Texas was at

the beach that weekend. The beach had beautiful white sand unlike we seen in Texas and was worth the drive, even though we had to put up with drunk teenagers to see it. The only bad thing that happened on that trip was that I bought my wife a diamond and garnet ring as a gift. I never gave her a wedding ring other than her matching wedding band. Somehow it got lost in the condominium and we never located it. The ring was not super expensive and it was mostly the thought that counted or at least that was the way I looked at it.

After years of putting up with the Texas beaches we decided the best thing would be to meet my wife's parents half way for a family vacation in the Gulf Shores area new the Florida panhandle. It was without a doubt the most beautiful beach we had seen. The white squeaky clean sand was so different from any thing in Texas we experienced.

## **Camping**

My wife and I camped several times at different lakes around Roanoke while I was in school and we always had a good time. When we first moved to Texas, we decided for our first Thanksgiving we would drive west until we found a camp ground. We had several spots marked on our Texas State map that looked good on paper. We also had a state tourist book which we got at the Oklahoma - Texas border. The problem was we were looking for camping like we experienced in Virginia, with beautiful tree lined mountain lakes and grass to lay our tent on. As we drove west we kept stopping at every camp ground along the route and the tent sites were rocky and not very scenic. We eventually got as far as Marble Falls as it turned dark and still could not find our perfect location. Since we were on a tight school budget we ended up driving all the way back to College Station having never found a place good enough for our Virginia camping tastes.

Our second camping experience was much better as a group of Indian students we met at University of Houston wanted to go camping. This time we did more research and knew where not to go. We found a place on the way to Austin that sounded good, so we took them to Bastrop State Park. The interesting thing was that we just

missed it the previous time as it was close to College Station but to the South. It was a fascinating part of Texas as the whole area was full of Loblolly pine trees, which was most unusual for Texas. At our camp site we felt like we were in the deep forest among the hills. We had a great time sitting around the campfire and letting them experience camping as it was supposed to be. After this successful find, my wife and I located several other enjoyable camp grounds to the North and east of Houston but none matched Bastrop.

We later on also took our children camping when they were young. I had so many fond memories of camping in Virginia with the Boy Scouts so I wanted the kids to experience camp fires and sleeping in tents. After moving to Austin we had more success in finding camp sites as we asked my expert camping cousins where to go.

## **Sports**

My wife often called me accident prone when I hobbled home after twisting an ankle or getting poked in the eye in a basketball game. Up to that time the only real injury I sustained was in Saudi. As I raced down the court for a layup, one of the opposing players, who was always too rough, came up and pushed me into the padded wall at the end of the court, forcing me to miss the shot. Somehow I hit the wall wrong and I heard something crack in my mouth. As I looked around the floor I saw blood dripping from my mouth. The next day I went to the dentist on the Aramco compound and he saw I cracked one of my back teeth. He put a black colored patch on the tooth and then after a week I went back and he filled in the area with a white patch. That patched tooth survived twenty years until it broke off in yet another basketball game while in North Carolina.

When we returned from Saudi, I was clearly addicted to basketball. In Houston, I found a YMCA on the Katy Freeway close to my office. I went three times a week to play during lunch with whoever showed up. One lunch time as I ran full speed down the court, the whole side of my shoe blew out and my foot made a weird sound. It did not feel like my typical past ankle injuries, but it felt much worst in a different way. The next day I could not walk so I went

to a doctor who suggested I see an orthopedic surgeon. The prognosis was that I had planar fasciitis which required surgery. It was first major injury after twenty years of intense sports activity. The doctor told me never to buy cheap shoes if I was going to be so active and I was now paying the cost. I had the foot surgery where they completely cut the torn tendon in my foot so it would gradually grow back correctly. In the meantime I had to hobble around on crutches and always wore very uncomfortable rigid foot supports in my shoes. After six months I was able to resume my basketball activities but for five years I wore those hard insoles. At the same time, the doctor discovered that I had absolutely flat feet. His secondary goal was to form arches to help my posture and potential back problems later on in life.

When we moved to Austin, I never found a good place to play basketball during lunch so I picked up running again, but always missed my weekly ball games. Instead I decided to buy a basketball goal for the driveway and dominate my kids by dunking over them freely in taking on all the kids in the neighborhood!

## **Grand Canyon and Disneyland**

After our daughter was born we decided it was time to head west for Christmas and visit my mother in Tucson and to see our best friends who had moved to Phoenix. It was a big deal as we had heard that driving through west Texas was the most boring drive in all the USA. The worst part was that it was a twelve hour drive from Austin to El Paso and at that point we would be half way to the Pacific Ocean. We decided the best thing was to start driving in the late evening and continue all night long until we reached the border. At least that way we would not have to see the boring parts, but we just had to stay awake in the middle of the night. We loaded all the kids into a van and headed for Arizona. We reached the Texas – New Mexico border just as the sun came up on the hills around El-Paso and we got to see the beautiful sunrise from the border rest stop.

We decided to see my mother first in Tucson and then head north to Phoenix. It snowed right before we got to Tucson so we went up as

far as we could go on Mount Lemmon so the kids play in the snow and throw snowballs at each other. We also went for a couple of scenic hikes around the hills with my parents. After a great time in Tucson, we left to see our best friends and to visit the Grand Canyon. We drove to Flagstaff to spend the night and found snow all over the hotel parking lot. The next morning when we woke up, we saw snow on the San Francisco peaks just north of Flagstaff. The drive to the canyon was flat and boring and then suddenly we reached the rim and beheld the more glorious sight ever. It is hard to say which was more impressive at first glance, the Himalayas or the Grand Canyon as they are both amazing. We spent a long time just looking at the lightly snow covered canyon as I had seen so many pictures of it, but it was nothing compared to seeing it in person.

After returning to Phoenix, we decided that it would be great to drive to California since we were so close. It was only an eight hour drive to Los Angeles and the kids wanted to see Disneyland, so we left early in the morning for the long drive. It was interesting seeing the countryside change as we drove through Arizona. The high point in the drive was when we stopped at Cabezon to see the man made dinosaurs at the entrance to Joshua Tree Monument State Park. The kids had seen a movie with the same dinosaurs in it and for some reason thought it would be fun to walk around them. It was a tourist trap for me, but the children all liked looking at them. I was more interested in the odd looking Joshua Trees to the north of the rest stop. I tried to get the kids to notice the Native Indian teepee shapes for the rest stops but they were not interested in those.

By the time we reached San Bernardino, the kids became excited as they knew we were getting close. We found a reasonably priced hotel near Disneyland and rested in the evening before an all day event the next day at Disneyland. My wife had been to Disneyland when she was young and had fond memories of the classic rides. The boys had other ideas of fun as they wanted to go on the fast rides. We stayed the whole day, riding almost all the rides. The funniest event of the day was when the two older boys wanted to ride the brand new Indiana Jones ride. We waited over an hour in line and when we finally got into the large jeeps and the ride began they both closed their eyes the

whole time. After such a long wait and I was the only one to see the ride!

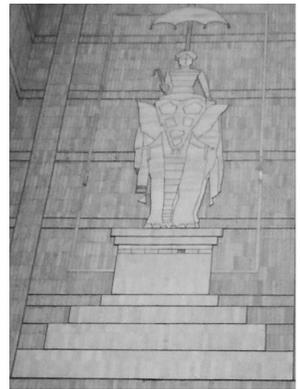
The next day we decided to go a different way home and so we drove south to San Diego in hopes of going to their world famous zoo. The drive took longer than we thought so we got out near Scripps Research Institute to see the Pacific Ocean. The boys wanted to go into the water but when they felt the cold water temperature they did an about face and ran from the water. Since it took us so long to get out of Los Angeles we did not have time for the zoo and kept driving on the southern route back to Tucson to see my mother again. It was a good decision as we got to drive through the hills of San Diego and then got a shock when we came to Algodones Dunes. They were a sea of whitish orange sand dunes as far as you could see, which reminded us of Saudi and before we knew it we were out of the dunes and driving on completely flat terrain. The drive was fairly boring but we had all the excitement we needed at Disneyland the day before, so everyone rested while I drove the flat lands of Arizona.

We had another decision to make once we got back to Tucson on how we should go home. The drive through southern New Mexico was like a dirty desert wasteland which we did not enjoy on the way out west. We wanted to avoid that even though the alternative was many more miles further. I wanted to see the Painted Desert so we headed back north through Phoenix and Flagstaff and then we headed straight east. We took a break and stopped at Crater Lake State Park, which was another tourist trap. The boys liked the thought of a small meteor causing such huge hole and they enjoyed walking around the rim of the crater. We drove through the Petrified Forest and the Painted Desert but that year many of the national parks were closed so we could only look at them from the road. It was still impressive nonetheless. We arrived in Albuquerque at night fall. It was well worth the longer drive to see northern Arizona and New Mexico. The next day we started the long trek back to Austin and as before we drove all night long to avoid the boring flat west Texas wasteland. In all it was a trip of a lifetime for the whole family.



# Section Seven

## Back to east coast



## 35. Lasik in Apex

After working in oil reservoir 3D modeling for six years and the previous six years in oil seismic exploration, I was all set to stay in the oil industry for life. The only problem was that my wife kept telling me she wanted to be closer to her parents while the kids were still young. That was a very strong argument since they were at a cute age only for a short time. We decided to move back to the East coast. Work in Austin was less fun after the owner left the company after selling it and we were tasked with merging our product with the new company's full set of products. It was a good time to leave, so I started looking for jobs.

I had a specific set of skills and searched through message boards looking in Washington, DC and Richmond, VA and Raleigh and Charlotte, NC. Each Sunday I went to the Austin library to look at the newspapers from these cities. One Sunday in the Raleigh News & Observer newspaper, I found a small job posting that matched what I was looking for. I sent an email to them and the response came back quickly that they were interested. The small company was moving from New York to Morrisville, NC and I was a perfect match. They flew me back for an interview and offered me a job that day. I also had another interview that evening with a two man startup which required 3D OpenGL experience but it seemed too small and risky for me.

When I got back to Austin, I decided to accept the first job. My wife flew back with our daughter and I started yet another adventure in driving all the way back with our four boys. The company I was going to work for agreed to pay for the shipping of our household goods which included my car so all we had to do was get the van back to NC. We put a small portable TV between the two front seats and the boys watched movies all the way home. Occasionally one of the boys sat up front with me in the special seat. We spent one night in a hotel as there was no way I could drive the whole way by myself. Our trip was uneventful which was just the way I wanted it to go.

When we left Buda, TX we had an offer on our house and thought everything was settled. We stayed in a corporate apartment for

two months at my new company's expense. We found out later that we were only supposed to stay for one month but they graciously paid for both months. After looking every evening and weekend for houses, we became tired of trying to find the perfect house and made a decision by just picking one. We found a house in a brand new neighborhood that was a speculative home that someone had brought and then at the closing decided not to buy. It had many upgrades specifically for the potential buyer but they discounted it just for us (or so we were told) as we needed to move in quickly.

We got a letter from our Realtor in Texas that the house had an offer on it and we signed the million forms and moved into our brand new house. Shortly afterwards we found out that the sell of our house fell through in Texas and now we were stuck with two house payments. The worst possible scenario had just happened to us. Even worse our house in Buda did not sell for almost a year and both of our parents had to help us with our duplicate mortgages. When we were ready to foreclose on Buda house, our mortgage company found a buyer at the minimum amount the bank required. That single transaction caused us grief for many years as it was listed on our credit report as a foreclosure even though the bank sold it and we lost all of our equity in the house.

## **Shifting employers**

My new startup had nothing to do with oil, so it took a while to get in the flow of something totally different. After a month at work, my boss left on vacation with his wife, who also worked at the company, and left me with many problems to solve while he was gone. It was hard not knowing what was going on or without anyone to ask, but in the end it turned out for the best thing as it forced me to dig for answers on my own. The first time my boss gave me a reward for working hard, he told me to take my family out to eat for a special dinner. We were new in the area and did not know where to go for a such an occasion, so we read about a fancy place near work called the Angus Barn. We only knew what we read in the local newspaper, so we decided that was the place for us. It looked very plain on the outside as it was a

group of red buildings with the largest one being a renovated barn. Once inside we found out the interior clearly did not match the exterior appearance as it was quite elegant inside. Only two of the children ordered any food as the rest ate only appetizers. It was definitely a memorable meal together, but we were shocked when the \$125 bill arrived. I had never seen a restaurant bill for that amount. I really wondered what my boss would say when I submitted the expensive report. Thankfully he was very gracious again as he realized I did not do it on purpose.

I liked work well enough to invite a friend to work with me. Friend was a loose term as we did not even know each other nor had we met before. My wife's mother and his mother were best friends when they lived in together in Fayetteville. My wife's father was working at the Veteran's Administration hospital in the same town that was the home of eighty-second Airborne Division of the Army. I heard their son did something with computers and other than that I knew nothing more. It was all filtered between two nontechnical mothers. I used the mother-in-law chain of command to send a message to him that the company where I was working was hiring and that he should try to get a job to work with me. I met him right before the perfectly executed job interview as he presented a video of the usability work he had done at his previous employer. It was by far the best interview I had ever witnessed and my boss gladly hired him. It turned out that we had so much in common that it was scary; however, we never heard about such things through the mothers. We became fast friends and worked together in two other companies later on. After three years, the startup was not really exploding in growth as we expected, so we both decided to get a job elsewhere by going together as a package deal.

Shockingly we succeeded as our technical recruiter knew exactly how to sell us both to another employer. We started the very same day for this new company. After two years and doing great work together, the whole Raleigh office was called for a meeting of unknown subject or origin. As we all gathered in the conference room, the Vice President from California announced that they were completely closing the Raleigh office. No one expected such shocking news. They

offered us a sizable severance package and provided from professionals resumes builder to help us locate jobs. My friend approached his previous employer and they came immediately and interviewed everyone. Many of them got jobs on the spot, but I decided to hold off and try to start my own business.

Through a friend of mine, who was a well known author of technical books, I learned of a contracting position with the company where he had a yearly reoccurring contract. It sounded like a perfect way to start out on my own. I was working at this company in north Raleigh when the World Trade Centers in New York City were destroyed. A coworker came over and told me I had to see a video posted on CNN's web site. I was so shocked when I first saw it, but then I thought it was just an accident. I called my wife shortly thereafter and found out that another plane had been hit. By the time I got home that evening, it was on all the TV channels and we just sat around and watched it in disbelief that such a tragedy had happened. When my six month contract was nearing completion I decided to rejoin my friend as he had returned to his previous employer with many of my other friends. It was a strange five years of moving around and working in many different industries, quite the change from working in Geophysics, but I slowly switched to being more of a general software developer. One of the best things I learned from my friend was a new term called usability. I read every book I could find on that subject.

## **Business trips**

I decided to practice this new skill by applying what I read while on the job. At one company I requested the help of the sales force, who interacted with customers directly to solicit their opinions on my new designs. Constantly taking their ideas and refining my designs quickly and then showing the revisions to them worked really well. That was the only time I saw people stand up and applaud my work. I also incorporated customer visits as I flew with the sales representatives to East Hartford, Connecticut and West Palm Beach, Florida to talk to major customers.

On a different visit I flew to Schenectady to see the original company who had funded the startup where I worked. After hearing the useful suggestions on how to improve my design, I decided to make the changes they requested during the presentation to see how they liked them. It made development fun and at the same time made the customers happy that their comments were taken into account towards the final delivered product. After these experiences I decided my goal in life was to pursue such a methodology full time.

At my next company I had a similar experience dealing with customers, but in this case I was in charge of a group whose customers were other internal developers in several remote locations. I found the remote interaction to be a challenge and yet the same results were achieved, it just required more dedicated work. I requested a well know technical book writer to visit Raleigh and San Jose offices to present why usability was important to all the developers. One of things I enjoyed the most was to present to customers how the usability methods helped define what the next generation products looked like. At such a meeting in Richardson, Texas I learned how much I enjoyed giving presentations in front of crowds. It was easier for me to do that than to argue with internal developers on the correct way to do things. All of this was due to my family friend pointing me in the right direction.

## **Quick decision turns bad**

Around this time I continued to play basketball three times a week. My glasses kept getting thicker and thicker with each passing year. I found it greatly annoying to have my glasses knocked off my face when I was fouled or having to clean them off when I could not see from the sweat. I decided to get prescription strength goggles even though they looked horrible. In a fit of disgust I saw an advertisement in the local newspaper for a well know doctor who was coming to do Lasik eye surgery in Raleigh for the first time. I read up about him and found that he had been trained by the same doctor my friends in Saudi used for RK eye surgery. This doctor lived in Greensboro and specialized in cataract removal for elderly people but he was branching out into

Lasik in the Raleigh area. They had a special rate for the first patients in this area, so I signed up.

I went for the prescreening and the 3D image of my eye indicated I was a good candidate. I was border line acceptable since I was legally blind without my glasses. I could see at twenty feet what people with normal 20-20 eye sight could see at eight hundred feet. I successfully met all the criteria and we set an appointment for my eye surgery. On the day of the surgery, I signed my life away on the medical form saying I would never sue for damages and that it was a voluntary operation. I was a bit nervous but the surgery had a really high success rate so I hoped for perfect eye sight. Right before the surgery the assistant ophthalmologist came up to me and told me that he had manually programmed the laser to match my eyes from the 3D image. I asked him how he tested it to make sure he got it right since every person was different and he told me he checked and double checked the settings. It made me feel partially better but I still wondered about his remarks. They sedated me so I was awake but very relaxed during the operation. As I entered the operating room I saw only the operating doctor and a single nurse. They put a special lens on my eye and after a couple of minutes they moved onto the other eye. On my left eye I smelled the nasty odor of my eye burning and thought I had not smelled that on my right eye. It was then that I realized something had gone wrong with the first eye.

After a couple of minutes they were finished and I was in a waiting room with my wife next to me. I had to keep both eyes closed for thirty minutes and then the doctor came in to check on my eyes. I opened my left eye and could read the letters on the eye chart although they were very fuzzy. My right eye had not improved at all. That is when I asked the doctor what had happened. He told me I had blinked and they had lost suction on my eye after cutting off the top layer of skin on my eye. Somehow that did not make sense in my logical mind. Since I signed my life away before the operation and only the doctor and nurse were in the room with me, I had no way of ever finding out if they made a mistake or if it really had anything to do with my eyes being sunken or the color of my eyes as I was told. I was immediately sorry I had the Lasik eye surgery.

Then the really bad news came, for the next four to six months I had to remain with one good eye and one uncorrected eye. The flap they cut took that long to heal before they could try again to fix it. I also could not wear contacts nor would glasses be any help in the meantime. The news just kept getting worse and worse by the minute. Before leaving they warned me that my eyes would be sensitive to light and I might have night vision problems. All of which made me wonder why anyone ever got it done, but they again told me that what happened to me almost never happens. It did not make me feel any better.

When we got home I was given thin plastic goggles to wear so as not to itch my eyes or touch them. I was given an eye patch for my uncorrected eye to see if that helped. After sleeping for over twelve hours, I tried to read a book but could not. I tried watching TV and it was too fuzzy at any distance to even bother. It was early summer and I could not enjoy the outdoors since my eyes remained very light sensitive. Somehow my boss at work had mercy on me and allowed me to bring my work computer home with me. The company bought high speed access to the Internet so I could work from home. I was in the middle of a huge icon redesign project where I worked with a graphics art firm in San Francisco, so it worked out for the best as I talked by phone to them about the designs when they needed further clarification. I could only work on the computer for an hour at a time, so I took constant breaks and spent time doing work over the phone. We also had to darken the living and dining room so I had a place to work without the light bothering me. I seldom went outside during the next four months and never read books nor watched TV. The few hours a day I had good sight in one eye, I spent working on the computer.

We already scheduled a summer beach trip and paid for the rental property, so we could not back out nor did any of the kids want to. We went on a family vacation to the Outer Banks in Duck, North Carolina. I had to avoid going in the water as the risk of eye infection was too great. I also had to be careful in the sun so I wore really dark sunglasses the whole time. After four months I could not take it any more and somehow got the courage to sit in front of the same doctor

and allowed him to operate on my right eye. It was more financially motivated than anything since he did not charge me to fix the one eye a second time. This time it worked correctly and as I sat in the same chair waiting for the results, I finally found out that my eyes were corrected to 20-45. Now I had a bigger problem. My drivers license was set to expire in one month and it required 20-40 to pass the vision test. I could not get contacts nor would glasses help me. Somehow God had mercy on me and on the day of my eye test I saw 20-40 and received my license renewal. I was so thankful as it was very difficult to get around in Raleigh without private transportation. It reminded me of a fellow I worked with who never got his driver's license and so had to live in an apartment that was close to the bus line and had to work at a company near a bus line on the other end. He survived but it definitely restricted what he was able to do and where he could go.

I continued to have problems with my eyes being too dry and for two years I used eye drops each night before going to bed, in the morning when I woke up and a couple of times during the day. During the same two year period I did not drive at night as I saw really bright star patterns in oncoming headlights. I had to make sure I left work early so I got home before it became dark. The other strange thing was that my vision fluctuated daily, it was great one day and the next day everything was fuzzy. The worst condition for my morning commute was fog as it drove my eyes crazy as they tried to constantly focus but were never able to do so because of the haze. Gradually over time the night driving improved and the dryness went away, but to this day if I am tired then my eyesight deteriorates greatly. The sad thing is that I quit playing basketball soon afterwards as I did not want to take a chance on getting an eye injury but it was wonderful not having glasses jump around on my face while running! In looking back, I am sorry I had the eye surgery but since I cannot go back in time, I enjoy my eyesight. One other odd thing about Lasik is that everyone's eyesight naturally deteriorates with age, so one day I will have to again wear glasses. It did not seem like a very good decision, but I did learn a valuable lesson in humility as I had to depend on my wife to help me daily during the ordeal. I have also learned to appreciate my eye sight every day since.

## 36. Remote Regions of Fuquay-Varina

Four years and two jobs later, we decided to leave Apex and find more acreage and a bigger house somewhere in the area. When we moved from Texas to North Carolina, we searched for two months and finally gave up and just picked a house. For us there is no such thing as a perfect house, so we just pick the best one that was available in our price range. No price came close to our previous houses in Houston, but then again the Houston traffic and weather was not at the top of our list of best places to live either. House hunting for me was never fun. My wife picked up housing books from grocery stores every time she shopped, but I cringed each time I saw one of the books on a table in our house.

Searching for houses was primitive then compared to how we now use the Internet to locate houses for sale. When we bought our Apex house, our Realtor was patient with us initially, but after a couple of weeks she clearly wanted us hurry up and decide so she could move onto the next house hunter. We did not want to put ourselves under the same pressure again, so my wife kept looking at free housing books and drove through areas where she wanted to live. We knew we had to move out of Apex if we wanted more than a postage stamp lawn. Our house had a tiny lot but the two houses behind us had the largest lots in the neighborhood so without a fence behind it us, it appeared we had more lawn than we really did. There was a large drainage area between our houses that the boys liked to explore.

One of the things that irritated us about the Apex house was our picky next door neighbor. On one side we had a young Indian couple who I enjoyed talking to but on the other side was a man who was on a mission to have a perfect lawn and our kids were preventing that from happening. We owned a dog and did not keep him on a leash so that drove him crazy. He posted small “Keep off lawn” signs all along our shared common lawn border. He also called the Town of Apex to complain that our dog roamed on his yard without a leash. My wife decided the dog needed freedom but that was not how he saw it.

Another neighbor down the road took it upon herself to show up on our back porch frequently to talk to my wife. Not that it was a bad thing, it was just odd to have to her on our deck at any given time, where she expected someone to talk to her about her problems. All of that helped us feel like it was time to move.

On the other hand, we had many fond memories in that house. Our boys learned to rollerblade and skateboard at that house with neighborhood kids. We built a couple of small wooden ramps, which also irritated our next door neighbor. He must have been opposed to kids having fun. Occasionally we took them to an indoor skate park in Durham as a way to improve their skills in their new hobby. There were always neighborhood kids in our short driveway wanting to do something. We had a basketball goal on the side of the driveway where I frequently demonstrated how easy it was to dominate the neighborhood kids. That naturally bothered our next door neighbor as the balls ultimately went in his yard. During the weekend I took the older boys to outdoor parks with me. While I played pickup basketball, they ran around the playground entertaining each other.

The last year we lived in Apex, the two older boys wanted to play in a basketball league. I took them two nights a week for practice which was thankfully in the same gymnasium. On the weekends they had games which was an exercise in boy shuffling. After a complete season, they both decided basketball was not for them. I was not disappointed as I wanted them to enjoy playing for the exercise, but I understood how frustrating it was when serious parents got involved. I learned from my childhood not to push someone to do something they don't enjoy doing.

When we first moved to the area we looked in Holly Springs and close to Fuquay Varina but it was way too far out in the country for us. It was not that far distance wise, but the small country roads made the drive even longer for me, as I worked near the airport. When I had my Lasik surgery I worked in north Raleigh, so living in Apex was conveniently located when I needed a ride to work. A friend of mine owned his own business and was interested in hiring me so that also

became a drawing point leading us to move out in what we considered the country.

We found a couple of houses with large lots, but then we located a fixer-upper that we seriously considered. It was larger than our Apex house and had two acres backing up to a pond, so no one lived behind the house. It was for sale at the same cost of what our Apex house was worth so that was a real bonus. It was like we were trading houses and getting a much better deal. The huge downside was that the house was twenty-five years old and was in bad shape. The original wallpaper and carpet were still being used and they both looked and smelled really bad. They removed a pot belly stove in the living room just before putting the house up for sale, but the whole house still smelled like wood smoke. All the closets had sagging particle board shelves which looked like they had held too much weight over the years. Somehow we over looked all these faults because of the land and the cheap price and so we bought the house.

One of our sons had severe allergy problems with dust, mold and smoke, so we decided to fix up the house on nights and weekends before we moved in. When we lived in Austin he had severe allergy problems, so much so that we took him for daily shots and eventually monthly allergy shots. We knew an old house would only cause him to get much worse. I enjoyed destroying the house as I ripped up the carpet, tore out all the closet shelves, pulled out all the bathroom counter tops and toilets. I left the kitchen intact as we decided to deal with that later on. As I tore up the bathrooms I saw that every water fixture in the house was leaking and had been doing so for many years as was visible from the dark floor stains. The oddest thing of all was the presence of hundreds of straight pins which were stuck in every wall thorough the house. Instead of using small nails in the wall, they had used tons of small pins to hang up who knows what. Half of the wall sockets did not work so I started the task of replacing all of them. It was cold working on the house as I did most of the work myself without any heat in January and February.

Once I had the whole house gutted, my wife's parents came for a house painting party. We bought a paint sealer to cover up the ancient

wallpaper and the smoke smells in the living room. My wife's father had the task of painting over the old drab brown kitchen cabinets. I called in a plumber to put in all new water cut off valves in the whole house. Right before moving into the house, I used too many power tools at the same time and started seeing smoke coming from the fuse box. That was definitely out of my league, so I called a licensed electrician who replaced the whole fuse box to the tune of \$900. At least we felt safer with a new panel and all new light sockets as they were a serious fire hazard. I bought all new cabinets for the bathrooms along with new sinks, faucets and toilets. We had a water softener and conditioner put in before I replaced the toilets. The last thing we did was put in all new vinyl flooring in the kitchen, laundry room, and all the bathrooms. The back sliding glass door had been leaking for years, so it had to be replaced. I got a friend to help me lift it in place and help me level it as it was clearly a two person job. By the time we moved in, it was like a new house inside except for a couple of minor details. It still looked nasty and rustic on the outside but at least it was livable on the inside. After a couple of years we knew it was time to install all new kitchen cabinets. Our two older boys helped me complete the kitchen overhaul task in two weeks. It completed the inside redecorating.

After moving into our renovated house I told the boys I would build them a new quarter pipe skate ramp, so we started our building task in the garage as it was too cold outside. It was not perfectly built but it provided hours of driveway entertainment for years to come. The highlight for the boys was when I tried to skate and somehow as I dropped in on the ramp, the skateboard flew from under me and went right through the shed glass window! It was the last time I tried to skateboard. We also had a trampoline next to shed and many times we caught the boys jumping from the shed roof onto the trampoline. Not exactly what we had hoped it would be used for!

One time I went into the attic of the house, I noticed water leaks and called a roof specialist. After twenty-five years the roof shingles were finished and had to be replaced. At the same time they replaced the shed roof and I told the kids to stay off the new shingles. That argument did not have much success as they continued to launch off

the roof. I even heard them talking about taking their bikes up on the roof and riding them down onto the trampoline, but thankfully that was just talk. One of our son's broke his collarbone by making the roof jump and still that did not keep them off. Boys will be boys I suppose.

The boys also enjoyed the back yard as it had a long gradual slope down to the pond below. The year after we moved in a ten inch snow fell at our house and for days they used their red plastic snowboards to race down the bank. They were out of school almost a week and used the hill every day until the snow was all gone. In the summer they liked to explore around the woods at the back of our house. It was worth the move to let them roam around outside.

## **Vacations**

The good thing about living in the Raleigh area of North Carolina is that the mountains were five hours in one direction and the beach five hours in the other direction. My wife's parents lived in Wilmington which was only two hours away. The beaches in the Outer Banks region were a five hour car ride. Over the years we visited most of the beaches in North Carolina for yearly vacations. When I was young we visited Nags Head, but by the time we visited the same area many years later the whole area had changed. My teenager friends told me about a trip in their Jeep where they drove from Virginia Beach to Nags Head on undiscovered sand trails, but those were gone being replaced with palatial houses. Our first vacation to that area was shortly after I had my Lasik surgery. I sat on the edge of the beach with my extremely dark sunglasses and watched the kids frolic for hours in the golden sand and clear blue water. Our house had a hot tub on the top deck which also entertained the kids for many hours. The only thing they did not like was the long walk to the beach as we were on the wide part of the island and it took over ten minutes to walk to the beach with all the ocean gear in tow from our rental house. For a day trip we drove as far as we could go north towards Virginia to a small area called Corolla where there was an old lighthouse. Along the way, the Intracoastal Waterway was visible on one side and the Atlantic Ocean on the other. We drove by massive mansions clustered

together. Later when we returned home, we checked on these houses and some of them were over \$10,000 per week to rent and slept twenty or more people. Clearly not something we could afford and we wondered who rented these places. At the end of our beach vacation in Duck we drove through Kitty Hawk to Nags Head and I did not recognize anything from when I visited as a young teenager. We stopped to explore the huge sand dune called Jockey's Ridge as the boys wanted to run up the dune and watch the hang gliders. That week was one of the best beach vacations we ever had as a family.

Every winter around Christmas, the family became eager to see snow, so we often headed to the mountains in search for the white stuff. Virginia was the closest location to see snow as the Blue Ridge Mountains were only a three hour drive away. One time we drove four hours to the Massanutten Resort in Harrisonburg in search of snow. They had an odd system where you had to appear in person early in the morning to buy tickets as nonresidents. Some of the times were sold out to residents but you never knew until you got there if any tickets were available. The Massanutten owners got to choose the evening before on the times which they used the snow tubing area. Typically they bought all the early morning slots, so the parents could snow ski in the afternoon. I got up early to get the tickets and then drove back to pick up the family. We all enjoyed our allotted time as we slid down the big hill and then put our inner tubes on the conveyor belt, grabbed the rope to walk back up the hill and repeated the same thing for a full hour of fun.

Another time when the kids were older they wanted to try snowboarding, so we went to Beech Mountain Ski area as it was one of the only places that had a dedicated snowboarding area. I decided to keep my non-skiing streak alive for another year in that I had never skied. When my mother had gotten remarried, her new spouse was quite the skier and was a member of the ski patrol so he enjoyed free weekend skiing. My mother enjoyed skiing and they went on yearly trips to real snow skiing in Vermont, but the whole idea never appealed to me. At a young age I was not fond of cold weather but after the two year stint living in India and then two more years in Saudi only increased my dislike for cold weather even more. I did not

mind my children having a good time in the snow as long as I could stay in the warm indoors. My oldest son occasionally went ice skating with his friends and later on when he got older went snowboarding with his teenage friends so he did not have my aversion to cold. On this trip to Beech Mountain he was on just such a trip. The remaining oldest boys tried their hand at snowboarding and found it was not as easy as it looking on their video games, but they still had fun doing it together.

## **Teenagers**

With the two youngest children, I developed a habit of taking them to a park every weekend, but in our move to Fuquay Varina there were no parks close by. We ended up driving back to their favorite parks in Apex and Cary to which they were thrilled. They always played tag and insisted that I participate or else it would not be fun. Some days we took their bikes so they rode them around while I watched. With the youngest children I took a more active role in entertaining them at parks instead of playing basketball while they entertained themselves as I had done with our oldest children. I cannot say for sure why this change occurred as it was not planned to happen that way. A game of tag for hours on end with two or three young ones was definitely just as good exercise as running up and down a court with sweaty guys! The children wanted to do it endlessly for hours. Thinking back I should have enjoyed every park visit more as it never crossed my mind those days would end.

At the same time our daughter was enjoying playgrounds, our oldest two boys were becoming teenagers. I always said that from ages four until fourteen was the best time to enjoy children. I am not a big fan of crying babies and dirty diapers, although my wife loved the baby years. I am also not too happy about living through hormonal teenage years either. I experienced those years myself and did not enjoy living them again as we watched our children turn into teenagers. Unfortunately some things never change and I watched my children made the same mistakes that I made. At least they did not

make all the same ones and unfortunately they created some new ones on their own.

Our life was fairly simple until our oldest son was given a car by his best friend's mother. He was not very happy with us when we forced him to move to Fuquay Varina causing him to leave all of his friends in Apex. If we had known then what we know now, we would not have allowed him to have a car. It was the beginning of many of our teenager problems. Instead of being content with our new house, he longed to be in Apex and constantly drove back and forth the twenty miles one way. It does not sound like a bad thing looking back, but sometimes he was gone for days at a time without talking to us. Some nights we got a call from his friend's parents saying that we needed to make our son leave. The calls came more frequently over time until we could predict when the calls came. It got to the point of being very annoying but we could not make our son see the light of his bad decisions.

Soon afterwards, our son dropped out of high school as my wife found him walking down the road as she was going to the grocery store. Also looking back this was yet another sign of bad news to come. Definitely the moral of this story is don't avoid problems as they don't magically disappear on their own. The low point came one evening during supper when our son declared that an Apex friend declared that our son would live with them. Like that somehow solved all his problems! We were told that all we had to do was sign paperwork to emancipate our teenage son since he was over sixteen years old. It had to be one of the worst ideas I ever heard and we were subjected to repeatedly hear the same thing for endless hours for days. Not just once but over and over like a dripping faucet we had to listen to this bad idea. We did not even stoop low enough to talk to this friend's parents to find out if they really approved this bad idea. Still the bad ideas kept coming.

The next highlight of our life with teenagers was the news of our son's new girlfriend was the one he was destined to live with the rest of his life. There was no argument strong enough to convince him that this was not true. The evening meal where this great news was

declared to us was memorable only in looking back. Within six months he left her for another girl as we had predicted would happen. A few months later we got the news that his new girlfriend was indeed the one he was destined to marry, but we heard no mention of the mistake about the last one.

During this time our next oldest son entered high school. There were no girlfriend's involved in that transition, but he dealt with the big change by becoming Gothic. This was a new thing for us as everything had to be black including his shared bedroom and all of his clothes. Then came the black fingernail polish, which was a bit odd looking. One day he invited his Gothic friends over to the house and we met the whole group who picked the same black color scheme. The kids did not seem any different from other kids except they looked different, so we really never minded this phase of his life as we knew it would end one day. Once he became comfortable in high school after a couple of months, he dropped the blackness and started wearing normal clothes again. This was when he met his girlfriend, but the relationship was nothing like the ones we had gone through with his brother. The biggest change for us was the day he brought home a young kitten. It became a challenge for us later on.

More teenage fun was in store for us. We had a long driveway which provided endless skateboarding entertainment for the three older boys. It also provided the space for our next to oldest son's sweet sixteenth birthday party as he invited all of his friends over for a Sunday afternoon party. He decided to setup a rock band on the driveway so he could entertain everyone. The only problem was that one of neighbors called the police as they did not enjoy the noise coming from our house, even though it was in the middle of the day. It was the beginning of our familiarity with police. When the police came, my son went out to talk to them. I was shocked at how unafraid my son was of police officers. Just the sight of police anywhere near our house sent cold chills down my spine as I knew it could not be a good thing. This time no harm was done as they just warned us to keep the noise down. Each event with police kept getting more dramatic.

The next police event happened when our next to oldest son decided, in the middle of the night, to burn stuff in our driveway. This was a case of teenagers collectively doing stuff they never do by themselves. At three in the morning, I awoke to the doorbell with four police cars with flashing lights in our driveway. Again our son was talking calming with them when I got outside. It did not help that a Fuquay Varina police officer lived across the road from us! He restricted his son from coming on our property when he heard his son was jumping off our shed roof onto our trampoline. We were getting a bad reputation among the police officers early on in our new home. Nothing came of the burning driveway event as the police left after scolding the teenagers for being pyromaniacs. Then it got more exciting.

On night in the early morning hours, our oldest son and his best friend went walking in our neighborhood. It is obviously a trend that nothing good happens when teenagers wander around in the middle of the night! This time they happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Five cars had been broken into that night in our neighborhood, which was very unusual for our quiet part of Fuquay Varina. Two people reported they saw our son and his friend near the crime scenes that night. A state detective came to our house and interviewed our son. Our son was guilty before being proven innocent, but we had no evidence to the contrary as they were clearly roaming around that night. The only thing that saved them from going to court was that a month later, our son was visiting a friend in Fuquay when he overheard the fellow bragging about breaking into cars in our neighborhood. When the police found out about it, our son was off the hook.

One of the low points in police activity came when our oldest son was caught with an open beer bottle in his car. That caused all kinds of problems since he was under eighteen. It did not help that he missed the first two court dates due to snow and ice storms which only delayed the inevitable. We received a notice in the mail that he would lose his license for life unless we dealt with the issue. We hired a lawyer to take care of it for us for the bargain price of \$1500. To me it was more like a bribe as the lawyer somehow got the charge dropped

as he approached the court judge for our son. It was a way to have a guilty party avoid a penalty for no other reason than paying him money, which is a bribe in most other countries. It was not the first time we had a visit from police but definitely dramatic enough we did not want any more such events.

## **37. Back to India for Books**

It was probably not the best timing in the world to leave my wife with wild teenage boys to return to India for a visit. A good friend of mine, who was one of the first people I met who knew about India, kept in touch with me over the years. He was the same friend who came to see us after we got married in Blacksburg. He and his wife visited us in North Carolina. We visited them in Singapore and in his home town in Pennsylvania. We had never lived close to each other, but had kept in touch by letter writing and by email. I helped him start an Internet book selling business. I created the web site from the book database he managed in India and I kept the web site running smoothly. It was definitely a niche market but the book business was a healthy source of income for him, but as a volunteered to help him for free. Finally after many years of running the business and coordinating the effort between us, he decided it was time to sell the business. Since I knew the technical details, it took very little effort to persuade me to return to India to help him sell the business. I was there to help answer the buyer's questions if any technical questions came up. At the same time a pastor at our church was going to Bangalore. He was attending a conference and I agree to take some things with me that they needed for the meetings. I notified my good friend Yudhisthir that I was coming to India and he agreed to take a train all the way from Kolkata to Bangalore just to see me. With every passing day, as my flight to India got closer, I became more excited to return again to the country I loved.

I chose to fly on Air India for the atmosphere and ambiance and the cheap price! The flight went from New York City to Mumbai with a stop in London. I was not able to sleep very well on the long flight. I can still recall the smell of India a couple hundred feet up in the air before landing. It was not the best smell in the world, but it was a memorable smell nonetheless. I had a short wait before my quick flight to Bangalore. I reached the Bangalore airport in the very early morning when most of the city was still asleep. It was great to see my friend waiting for me with a taxi for the short ride to his home nearby. His

wife left with his daughter for the week so we had the house to ourselves along with his son. I had a slight problem as the conference center I had to go to was far in the northern part of Bangalore. It was off the sparsely populated Ring Road, but I had to go through the heart of the city to get on that road.

The conference center was in the middle of no where and most people I asked for directions know nothing about it even though I had a street address that the taxi driver was trying to follow. We stopped every few streets to ask further directions and somehow we finally found my destination. I arrived early so only a couple of white skinned foreigners were present. I helped them set up equipment for the conference and generally did anything they needed help with, although I never met any of them before. They were not like the foreigners I had worked with before in India and something I just did not feel right when I was around them and saw how they interacted with each other. I was already sorry I was at the conference but I knew my friend Yudhisthir was coming so I had to wait for him.

When I first saw Yudhisthir it was worth putting up with the bad conference to see him. We took a couple of trips into downtown Bangalore to get some exercise and to look around for a break from the conference and to just talk after a long absence. It was great to see him again and to catch up after being apart for ten years. I was sorry to see him leave after two days but at least we got to spend some quality time together when we avoided the conference.

I then spent a couple of days packing large book shipments for library customers and finished the book inventory to account for all the remaining books. I finally saw the thousands of books in the small warehouse that were listed on the web site that I helped maintain. We then met the man who was buying the book business and negotiated how to transfer the web site and the books to him. He owned a book selling business with a public showroom, so he was familiar with the business. The technical aspect of the sale was not really an issue, but my friend appreciated me being there just in case. I met with some of the workers in the back area of the book store to talk to them on how to get our database into their system. For me, it was just fun being in

India and traveling around Bangalore. We talked about making a day trip to Mysore or to see a local Jain temple, but we ran out of time as we had another big trip ahead of us.

My friend's spouse and daughter were already in Kovalam, Kerala for spring break and we had to take his son down for the final couple of days to be with his friends. In Bangalore I was already as far south I had been in India, but now we were going even further and I was excited about yet another train trip. We were scheduled to leave on a late night train but the train arrived a couple of hours late. We reached the train station just as it should have left, so we sat around talking while waiting for the train to leave the station. I took one of the top berths and settled in for the night's sleep. It was quite cool in Bangalore as it was October and the high elevation made the climate very pleasant during the day and cool at night. Thankfully my friend had extra blankets as it would have been too cold to sleep without covers.

When we woke up, the train was leaving the hills and entering the coastal plain. I preferred to stand in the train door to take in the sights and smells of rural India. I was shocked to see the wealthy houses along the train tracks as I was used to seeing the poorest of the poor living near the tracks in northern India. I saw satellite dishes on top of some houses as well as cars parked in the dirt driveways. I was curious about what I saw so I asked my friend about it and found out that this was a popular region for workers from the Middle East. The money came back to this area and funded the houses I was seeing all along the way. When we reached Cochin I saw the large jets on the airport runway, which was also a curious site to behold in the middle of no where. Another example of The Gulf region money benefiting India.

Once the sun came up and we entered the coastal areas of Kerala, the temperature rose dramatically. It was hot enough that I started perspiring just sitting on the seat in the train. We had a second class non A/C sleeper berth as it cheap and we only had to take a little heat for a couple of hours. As we traveled along the coast I saw the famous

Kerala backwaters from the train window. By far, my favorite way to see India was by train and this trip did not disappoint.

As we reached our final train stop at Trivandrum station, we only had to take a taxi down the hill side to the beach area below to Kovalam. The coconut trees lining the rocky shore with the red and white lighthouse nearby was scenic to say the least. We saw people splashing in the waves as we walked down the concrete boardwalk along the beach to our hotel as it was around three in the afternoon. Since we would be leaving early the next morning, I decided I had to take the chance of a lifetime and go for a swim. I wondered why few people were going far out from the shore but once I got into the water I realized why it was the case. The waves were not only large but they were very strong. The half moon shaped bay was like a funnel for the waves to beat down the mostly white tourists. It was still fun and I was glad I took the opportunity even if it was only for an hour.

That evening I had the highest privilege of meeting Graham Staines' widow. Her daughter was attending the same school as my friends children and was there for the break. We ate in a hotel that was an open area with a tin roof covering the eating area. A man came by with raw fish and asked us which ones we wanted and after we picked out the best fish, the owner took the fish and we waited while our fresh food was cooked. We talked about all kinds of things since we had all been in India at the same time many years before. I was curious about how Gladys was doing as she was quite famous in India after Graham and her two sons had been burned to death in his Jeep by a radical group in rural Orissa. I read the book that was published about Graham and was so sad since I remembered him and his kindness to me twenty years before. Gladys was contemplating returning to Australia as being recognizable in India was not always the best thing for a white face. It was hard enough for me on the ride down through Kerala when the students got on the train to ride home. The constant heckling by young people making fun of me was very hard even though I was a seasoned India traveler. It was hard for me to imagine how difficult it was on Gladys with the constant press requiring her attention. In addition, she had to have body guards around her always. I was so happy that

evening just to be around her and to talk about old times for several hours.

The next morning I awoke to the sunrise and decided to walk along the beach to get some exercise before our long train trip back to Bangalore. I watched several Indians running on the beach and when one stopped near me I asked him why he was running. He told me he was training with the national track team. I did not know there was such a thing but he matched the description as was muscular and very fast. For a while I crawled around on the rocks out in the water on the far end of the bay from the lighthouse exploring to see what I could find. I then spotted a man on the beach as he was by himself and was pulling something. I walked back towards the hotel and asked my friend what the man was doing. We walked up to the top of a hotel to eat breakfast and while eating more men started helping the first man on the beach. By the time we finished breakfast there were ten men pulling in unison. I was told that every evening they went out into the middle of the bay and dropped their nets. In the morning by hand, they pulled the net to shore and the fish caught in the net were sold to the tourists for food in the hotels at night, as we had done the night before. There was always something new to experience in India with every visit.

On the train back to Bangalore, we bought fresh banana chips for snacks, which were by far the tastiest dried fruit I ever ate. On one short train stop during lunch time, we exited the train to get one of the famous local delicacies. It was a small bundle wrapped in newspaper and tied with string, that would barely fit between both of my hands. Back on the train I found a delicious meal once I unwrapped it and saw the food was also wrapped in a banana leaf. The rice was wonderfully fresh and the curry was super spicy and tasted delicious. It was the best meal I had in India on that trip. I was sorry to leave, but my wife had given me permission for a ten day trip and I was nearing the end of my time away from America. The plane trip home was a time for me to reflect on the fun I had while in India.

When I reached home to my smiling wife and children, I found out that our oldest son had taken advantage of me being away and had

invited many of his friends to our house for a party. It got out of hand, as my wife did not have me around to help her. I quickly came back to earth from my great trip and was welcomed to the realities of life in the real world as a parent of teenagers.

# Section Eight

Texas howdy



## **38. San Antonio & the draw of Texas**

There is always something appealing about a place that holds many fond memories. Even though my wife was not a big fan of the Texas climate, it still had a draw for us since all but one of our children were born there. The low cost of housing was definitely appealing also. I was actively job hunting, since I was discouraged at work with a couple of things and was ready to try something new. Over the previous six years I came to appreciate and highly regard usability and User Interface design. The project I was involved in at work had the best team of usability professionals I worked with in one place. I decided it was time for me to stop doing development full time and enter the brave new world of usability. The more I thought about it the more excited I became and started looking for jobs around the USA. I finally found the perfect job and after an in-person job interview, I convinced my wife it was time to pack up our stuff and head to San Antonio, Texas. We visited the city many times while in Texas but had never lived there. It was quite famous for the downtown tourist area called the Riverwalk, which we visited several times. The whole family got involved in the house hunting as I knew where my new office was located and with house searching available on the Internet, they spent days looking for the perfect house. Before we left for Texas, they decided on the house they all wanted.

Moving for us was not that big a deal as we had done it many times. The process was not much fun but we liked how it forced us to get rid of stuff we no longer used and cross country moves helped get rid of even more. We contemplated having a moving company do the move using my forthcoming new hire bonus, but we decided it would be better to use that money towards living expenses until we found our new house. That turned out to be a very good decision in the end. Since we were renting the largest moving van possible, we still had limits on what we could take. We frequented the local thrift store to donate our useful belongings that were in good shape. A friend of ours, who renovated houses, brought his huge trash trailer so we freely threw away worthless stuff until we filled his twenty foot trailer. The

size of the rental truck decided mostly what was allowed to go with us. We had our full size custom van, which my wife would drive and my oldest son would be in charge of getting my car to Texas along with his two younger brothers. The boys were very excited about the road trip, but my wife was a bit nervous. We had short range walkie-talkies just in case we got separated as well as my oldest son had a cell phone.

The hardest decision was what we would do with our four cats. I had absolutely no interest in taking them half way across the USA, but I was overwhelmingly overruled by all the other family members. We had one of the cats since our days in Apex when it just wandered to our house and made our house his home. While in Apex we got another cat to be his companion. The last one was brought home by my next to oldest son as he found it with his girlfriend and could not resist the temptation to bring it home. The biggest problem was that this cat had five kittens right before we were ready to leave for Texas. We had to find homes for them, and of course the kids wanted to keep the cutest one which brought our total to four to make the trip with us. That was the worst decision we made related to our trip.

I selected a rental truck company we had not used previously as I read good reviews about it. On the day I went to pick up the truck and they ran out of size of trucks I requested. It was a sign of the troubles to come, but we sold our house so there was no turning back. The truck company redirected me to a different location where I finally found the last thirty foot truck in the Raleigh area. The truck did not look brand new but it was in good shape and I accepted it desperately as it was my final alternative. We packed all of our possessions into the truck and the few things left over were stuffed into my car and my wife's van. My wife's parents came to see us off and at last we left on the family road trip. The weather was beginning to heat up as it was in the middle of June when we headed west. I did not think much about it on the first day when we started out in the afternoon and drove until dusk as we reached South Carolina. The next day was even hotter and I found out that the A/C did not work in the rental truck. To reduce the heat, I rolled down the window but then it was so noisy that I could not even hear the radio or the walkie-talkie when the other family members called. The truck did not have power

windows, so I only kept the driver's side window down as I had no chance of hearing anything unless I put the windows up and I could not reach the passenger side window while driving. I lost so much sweat that my shirt was completely soaked by lunch time.

Driving three vehicles was not eventful, which is how we liked it. Occasionally the three boys in my car sped out in front of us just because they could in my fast car. The truck I was driving had governors on the engine so I was not able to drive over 60 m.p.h. It also was not much fun driving as it slowed down our arrival time considerably. We drove I-20 all the way to Tyler, Texas and as we entered into Texas we saw an enormous thunder storm ahead of us in the distance which made a dramatic entry into Texas. Before reaching San Antonio we stopped off to see the house where we lived in Buda just south of Austin on I-35. It was amazing to see how large the trees had become which we had planted seven years before.

When we finally reached San Antonio, we drove to the apartment complex where we reserved a three bedroom apartment with garage. All the kids piled into the huge common area near the apartment office while I talked to the rental woman. When she saw all of our kids, she asked how many we had and when I told her, she said we could not stay in the apartment even though we had a reservation. I told her that when I called to make the reservation, I told them how many children we had and they said it was fine. She said that San Antonio had strict fire codes and we had too many people for a three bedroom apartment and they currently did not have any four bedrooms available. That was the first in a series of disappointments we faced in our San Antonio move. Since we were all tired and needed a place to sleep, we found a hotel nearby and rented two rooms. We were in panic mode since I had to return the truck in a couple of days and we had no place to live or store our belongings. My wife could not locate an apartment with a short term lease big enough for our family, so we kept calling places until we found an extended stay hotel. We paid for a week and then emptied the truck into a public storage unit in Helotes, Texas. The hotel was noisy at night and was not very clean so we shifted to another place closer to work.

All during the first month, my wife tried to find a house to buy to get out of the hotel shuffling mode. We all liked the house we had found on the Internet while in Fuquay Varina, but then the bad news hit. We sold our house before leaving North Carolina, but the buyer's mother was the Realtor involved and she wanted everything perfect before her daughter moved in. They found that the twenty-five year old septic tank was too small for the house and they wanted it replaced to the tune of \$5000. Then they claimed the crawl space was not properly draining so we had to pay \$1000 to put in a French drain. Besides the fact that we were losing tons of money to the house repairs, we also were paying way too much for hotels in San Antonio. Worst of all, waiting for the repairs prevented our house from selling so we had no money to buy another. Finally the Realtor we were working with in San Antonio had mercy on us and let us rent her sister's house for two months while we waited for our house to close in North Carolina. All the while we did cat juggling with four cats and five kids. It was a very stressful time, but the rental house helped release some of the pressure. Finally our house sold and we bought the one we had been waiting to move into. We rented a truck to move our stuff from storage and our rental house into our new home.

I should have known something fishy was going on the first night we arrived at our new house with our rental truck. Our new next door neighbor came up to me, as I was finished unloading in the dark, and told me to watch out for my other neighbor as he was odd. An hour later, the other supposed odd neighbor came out and told me to watch out for the other neighbor who had previously warned me about him. Such a strange beginning to our new life in San Antonio! Our house was only ten minutes from my new job, which was really great as I had not had such a short commute since my first job in Houston, when I walked to work. I drove by Sea World every day as it was right across the major road from our housing development.

That fall, we had kids in elementary, middle and high school. Our son in high school complained about school but we did not know if he was uncomfortable with the new school or if he really had problems with it. As I spoke to him after school one day, he told me that that he was approached daily by drug dealers at school offering free drugs to

get him hooked. Shortly after that we pulled him out of public school and he started doing high school at home over the Internet.

In the second year we were in San Antonio, our middle son moved up to the new high school. As we drove by and saw it being built, we initially thought it was a huge new mall. On the first day of orientation, we saw just how large it was. For some odd reason, it was built with identical sides, maybe to help kids get lost in the school. Soon after starting school one of his new found friends was beaten up right down the road from our house. That was when we learned that gangs dominated the residential area right across from Sea World and came into our neighbor hood at night looking for trouble. It was against the law for anyone under eighteen to be out after 10:30 p.m. and we suddenly realized why. The police had so much trouble with gangs that they did not want to deal with random acts of vandalism or stupidity by teenagers when real gang violence was a nightly occurrence. If we had known all of these things before leaving North Carolina, we would have never left. We thought it was a chance to force our kids to make new friends and escape the bad habits they were developing, but the environment we put them in was a big city with much bigger problems.

One of the other reasons we wanted to move to San Antonio was the cheaper cost of housing. For almost the same cost as our house in Fuquay Varina, we had a custom pool with hot tub in our backyard as well as a full sport court ready for volleyball, tennis and basketball. A large farm was behind us as we lived at the very end of a cul-de-sac, so the large mesquite and post oak trees made our back yard seem like we were in the county. Even though the house was a dream one for us, we had many family troubles in store for us while we lived there.

One of the first signs of trouble came one morning at 3 a.m. Yet again teenagers roaming around in the middle of the night meant trouble. I awoke to flashing lights in the living and dining room outside our bedroom. At first I thought it was one of the kids getting a drink but the lights were really randomly being switched on and off. Adrenaline started rushing through my body as I started to panic wondering if a burglar was inside our house. We normally locked our

bedroom to keep wayward children from randomly coming into our room, so I did not fear someone opening our door. Right before the lights flashed in the living room I thought I saw a light outside. Our bedroom was the only one on the first floor and the windows in our room overlooked the pool. For thirty minutes I waited and thought about what I to do. Just then I heard the phone ring and was so thankful as I thought it would scare away the burglar. It rang a second time and then the lights stopped being switched on and off. After a couple more minutes the doorbell rang. I was so happy as I thought maybe the police were calling to check what was going on in our house. Most of my neighbors were ex-military and I knew at least one of them was a police officer, so I felt safe until this event happened. I went to the door and found a police officer waiting for me. I asked him if he saw someone inside our house turning the lights on and off to which he replied he had not see anyone. As I looked at his police car I saw our next to oldest son in the back seat with handcuffs on so I knew that was not a good sign. The police officer told me he was giving my son a warning for being out after 10:30 p.m. as an underage teenager. He then walked to the car and chauffeured him to our front door and released him with yet another warning. I closed the door and was sternly angry with my son and then because of the late hour went to back to bed. It was only after a couple of days when the friend he was with, came to our house and revealed what had happened.

One of the people my son met in school introduced our son to a neighbor of his. This fellow was six years older and unfortunately a little too wise in the ways of the world. On the night of the police event, Ryan decided to hold a special rock concert inside an abandoned grocery store a couple of miles from our house. Over many weeks he smuggled a complete PA sound system into the empty store. Finally when he had it all arranged, he invited a group of skateboarders inside and began to have a concert for them with my son as the lead guitar player. There was an active gas station right next to the grocery store and a police officer drove up, heard the noise and went over and opened the locked grocery doors to find a party going on. All the skateboarders fled the scene into a huge empty field behind the store. Our son with his school friend jumped in Ryan's car and

tried to flee even though neither one of them had a driver's license, which was mistake number two. Number one was being inside the store. The only good thing was that my son was not behind the wheel, so he did not get a resisting arrest charge like his driver friend. Ryan had already premeditated his escape and hid in the A/C duct work inside the building and did not get caught. The police confiscated all of his audio equipment and his car hoping he would come to get them and then they would bust him. He hid in the duct work for over a day and finally got out and came directly to our house. Somehow from that point on, as hard as we tried, we could not force Ryan away from our family.

It just seemed like everything bad in the family started with Ryan. Our oldest son began hanging out with him and the two of them disappeared for a week to go to the beach right after the police event. I helped my son buy a car at the spur of the moment as he just had to have one and they used his car to go down to South Padre beach. When they returned, I discovered that Ryan was a drug dealer and they lived off his drug money while at the beach. The next time I saw him I jumped all over him and told him if I ever caught him giving any of my kids drugs then I would immediately call the police and I would never stop hassling him until he was behind bars. We seldom saw him after that, but he occasionally came to our house with his brother to play on our band equipment in the garage.

About this time our oldest son started acting really strange. He came home and talked about the oddest things. He yelled at us for hours even though I told him not to as he obviously upset his brothers and sister with his stupid talk. We could not figure out if it was one particular thing or a combination of things that set him off. We wondered if he had mental problems, teenage hormones making him go wild or drug use with Ryan or a combination of all three. Just the sight of us in the house set him off on one of his rants. One of the things he picked up from Ryan was learning about the Mayan culture. On one particularly bad evening when he got home, our son claimed that he had found his purpose in life as it was to save the world from the upcoming asteroid attack that would destroy the world in 2012. If he had just said that stupid sentence and left, we would have ignored it completely, but we had to listen to an ever increasing volume of this

declaration for two hours. It was but a single illustration of the parent abuse we suffered that year. We took him to be medically evaluated but he had the uncanny ability to tell the doctors what they wanted to hear or what he wanted them to know.

The worst event came one morning at 7 a.m. when I got a call from a police officer who saw my son on the East side of town and told me I should go get him. He was not arresting him but said I should get him quickly as that area of town was not safe for white boys. He then hung up without giving me any more details. I found it very odd, but went to work and tried to call our son on his cell phone to find out where he was located. Around 10 a.m. he finally called back and gave me the address where he was located. He told me to bring the spare key since he lost his car keys. I looked up the address and found he was fairly close to the indoor stadium here the Spurs played basketball, so I knew how to get to him. I had never been in that part of town as it was not safe for anyone at night and I felt odd driving through it in the middle of the day. I finally found my son at the end of a road beside a big field with old warehouses in the distance. I looked in his car and saw the stereo had been ripped out of the dash and all of his CDs were gone. I asked him what happened to his keys and he said the fellows who did this had threw them in the big field behind his car. My son looked very tired and looked stoned out of his mind, but I had no choice but to get him out of there fast, so he drove his car in following me home. As in most cases, I heard the full story later but it was hard to tell whether it was true or made up. That is the problem with drugs and alcohol as they distort your view of reality so what may seem real really never happened.

This was the story that I heard from my son when I got home. He said he was driving in downtown San Antonio near the Riverwalk late at night. A prostitute approached him and asked for a ride to the neighborhood where I found my son that morning. When he dropped her off at a gas station, her pimp jumped into our son's car and insisted that he be driven around the neighborhood as he bought and sold crack cocaine. When they stopped in front of one of these crack houses, he insisted my son go in with him. This went on for many hours. Then he told my son to park his car at the end of the street and then several of

his buds showed up. They then walked from crack house to crack house the rest of the night. Just as our son was fearing that he would lose his life that night, he was taken back down a road and told to walk to his car that was at the end of the street. He arrived only to find his stereo was stolen and then the police officer drove up. This was yet another illustration of bad things happening at night and we kept telling our son that God protected him as he could have easily died that night at the hands of this pimp and his druggies. It was not the first or last time we clearly saw God protecting our son, even when he put himself in a bad situation.

I would definitely not be telling the whole story if I only talked about the bad news as several good things happened to us in San Antonio also. My youngest son started following the NBA Spurs basketball team with great passion. We attended a couple of games and were in San Antonio when they won their first NBA championship. Almost everyone at work was a huge Spurs fan but there were a couple of die hard Lakers fans among them, who had been transferred from the Los Angeles offices. On our first house hunting trip in the area we attended Max Lucado's church in the northern part of the city to see the ex-Spur David Robinson speak. We decided to attend that church full time as I had previously completed a book study written by Max with a small group in Fuquay Varina and really liked it. I read several of his books and found him an eloquent speaker. One day when I was searching for a Sunday school classroom I turned around only to see David Robinson standing in line behind me and at seven feet two inches he was a foot taller than me but appeared much larger than life. We occasionally saw him in church on Saturday night which we attended to avoid the Sunday crowds. The music was really wonderful and several of times a year they brought in well known Christian artists to play for special events.

Max always impressed me by his humble attitude as well as his great sermons. I could not say the same for another well known church we attended in the area as that man was clearly full of himself and was proud of what he knew. I told my wife that I never wanted to attend there again as once in a life time was enough. The first thirty minutes was all about politics in the Middle East, which I could have heard on

the TV news commentaries instead of in a church. We also visited a couple of churches closer to our house. One of them had music so loud that I could not hear my wife speaking to me when she sat next to me and shouted in my ear. When we visited other churches we realized even more how special it was to hear Max speak each week.

Our two middle sons became very good friends as they shared a room and enjoyed playing music together, but the two younger kids enjoyed San Antonio the most. We spent many hours on our sport court playing basketball and often the neighborhood kids came over also. I had to show them how to play the game and never allowed them to beat me. We had the most fun when we lowered the goal to seven feet and had dunking competitions as I had to show them my dunking skills. Since we lived on a cul-de-sac we also played touch football in the street. Our next door neighbor had twin grandsons who had to be schooled in the ways of street football when my youngest son played against them.

A woman I worked with lived a couple of blocks down the street from us and her daughter and oldest son were the same ages as our youngest two children, so they both became close friends. The girls often went swimming in our pool together when they got home from school as they were best friends. Our daughter had some learning disabilities similar to what I had when I was her age. In North Carolina they put her in a special reading program, but it was in San Antonio with a wonderful program at her school when she finally got over the hump and became a great reader. It was worth the move half way across the country just to see this transformation. She went from struggling in all school subjects to excelling in them all.

We did not take as many trips as we had done the first time we lived in Texas, but we went water tubing a couple of times which was fun. One time I took two of our boys with me and we floated on the Guadeloupe River in 90 degree weather. We got cold with goose bumps on our skin most of the way. We were floating on the spring fed part of the river where the water was around 70 degrees. We still had fun lazily floating down the river all day long. We found a couple other water places nearby that provided hours of activity, most of

which we hit when the river was flowing freely instead of in the middle of the summer when it was mostly dried up.

One summer our youngest son was brave enough to want to go to summer camp by himself even though he did not know anyone who was going. He found a place called Laity Lodge Youth Camp (LLYC) out in the middle of the Texas Hill Country. We read up on it and the camp was run from funds from owner of H.E.B. Grocery stores. In San Antonio, he had a monopoly on grocery stores as it was the only grocery available. We sometimes shopped at the Super Wal-Mart or Super Target but the H.E.B. was the only true grocery store in the area. We did not know what to expect when we dropped him off after a couple of hours driving west from San Antonio. After two weeks, we returned to pick him up and found he was very emotional about leaving. He had the time of his life, which we repeatedly heard from time to time.

One of the interesting and unexpected things to happen to us was during the first New Years celebration in our neighborhood. Since fireworks were illegal inside the city, many people came into our neighborhood just outside the city limits. Our neighborhood became a theme park of fireworks until about one in the morning. The kids climbed on the roof to watch the huge fireworks being launched from every cul-de-sac in our neighborhood. Finally around 11 p.m. they came inside since the smoke from the fireworks covered the whole area of around 1500 homes and it was hard to breathe in the smoky haze around our house. Unlike a theme park which shot up fireworks for thirty minutes, we saw a fireworks show of the same quality for three hours. It was unlike anything we ever experienced. The good news was that we saw it twice a year as the same flurry of fireworks happened on July 4 also.

## **39. Trips out of Texas**

During our second summer in San Antonio we bought a Fiesta Texas theme park season family pass. It was only thirty minutes from our house to the North part of the city. We went on the days when the kids were out of school to avoid the weekend crowds. Some weekends we went only to ride specific roller coasters. One time I took my youngest son during the week when the park was mostly empty. He wanted to ride every roller coaster in the park since it was the only time we saw no lines. We rode all eleven of the park's roller coasters in a couple of hours and I have never been so close to throwing up in all of my days in theme park attendance. Since that day, I have little interest in riding roller coasters. Maybe it was my age or maybe it was the speed overdose. It doesn't matter which one as I lost the need for speed after that day. I realized why lines are good in theme parks as they helped the body restore equilibrium before twisting and turning at super high speeds.

### **Los Angeles**

Also that summer I had a business trip scheduled to Los Angeles. We decided to take the two younger children for a family vacation since the three older boys had all flown back to North Carolina to be with their friends. Since it was near my youngest son's birthday, we let him decide where he wanted to go on the second weekend. For the first weekend, my daughter wanted to go to Disneyland as she had never been there. It was interesting to return after so long and much of the park remained the same except the price which had gone up to \$125 per person which was a shock to my system. The ticket also included California Adventure which was right across from the Disneyland front entrance. After we rode what the kids called the baby rides for nostalgia sake, we rode everything they wanted to except Space Mountain which had a three hour wait. In the middle of the afternoon we went over to California Adventure and found what everyone agreed was the best ride of our life. The Tower of Terror looked like a tall building from the front so we did not know what to expect as we

walked up to the ride. Once inside we realized the elevators moving in all directions was very different from a typical roller coaster and much more fun. I am scared of heights so the drop from the very top on the outside ledge was not the highlight of my life, but I still enjoyed it with my screaming children. As it turned dark we reentered Disneyland to watch the park parade and to go on “It’s a Small World” ride, mostly for my wife’s benefit. By the time the park closed at midnight we were extremely tired but we definitely enjoyed every dollar that day.

Since our hotel was in Brea, my wife took the kids on day trips as I left the rental car with her and walked to my office located across the road. We went to Knott’s Berry Farm one evening for old time’s sake as we had taken the two older boys there the year we got back from Saudi as I had another business trip that year to Brea. Another evening we drove down to Huntington Beach to eat at a place called Ruby’s at the end of the pier. It was hot in the middle of July, so we never expected what happened when the sun set while we waited in line to get into Ruby’s. We all wore shorts and short sleeve shirts, but the air blowing off the cold Pacific Ocean gave us goose bumps as we waited thirty minutes to enter the small old style soda shop. We were so happy to be out of the cold air and inside the building. All week, the kids were really waiting for Universal Studios Hollywood on the second weekend. We arrived as the doors opened and stayed until we ran out of energy as the sun set. The kids really enjoyed the studio tours as we had the best tour guide ever who made the most mundane things entertaining. Everything went well until we waited in a long line for the “Mummy Returns” ride only to find out that it broken down just as we got close enough to see the ride. My daughter was too scared to ride the “Jurassic Park” water flume ride so we left that one for another time.

On our last Sunday in Los Angeles, I told the kids I had enough entertainment and now it was time for an educational adventure. I always wanted to visit the Getty Museum since reading about it in art appreciation class in college so I was not letting that opportunity pass me by. I also read that they were having a special exhibit on my favorite artist of all time, Albrecht Dürer. In all of our trips and the

mega city, we ran into traffic jams but we did not expect what happened as we drove to the art museum. When driving to Universal Studios we rode on I-210 going through Pasadena so this time we decided to go a different way to avoid traffic although we did not expect much on an early Sunday morning. We took the I-105 to I-405 and as far as we could see in front us was a huge traffic jam. Now I finally understood why all the people in the Brea and Los Angeles office complained about traffic. We sat for two hours at 9 a.m. on Sunday morning before reaching I-10 when the freeway finally cleared up. It was all worth it to me as the \$10 parking was insignificant to the beauty inside the free Getty Museum and the building itself perched on the highest hill above the city of Los Angeles. We saw the yellow pollution haze in the city below, but it was still an amazing site from the Getty balcony to see the whole valley below and the ocean to the West. I watched the children appreciate the art as we walked through the museum, but after a while it all became the same to them. At least we saw the Dürer etchings first where I took my time.

As far as business goes for that trip, I had to travel from Brea by commuter rail to downtown Los Angeles to the main office. I had explicit directions on how to catch the correct train. The trip was not very scenic as most of it was not worth writing about. When I got to the downtown station I went out the wrong side of the main station and found myself in a park with many homeless people. I felt safe as most of them were asleep, but I wandered around looking for the right direction for some time. I had to get a bus downtown from the train station so finally after many inquiries I found the correct bus. My final bus stop was right next to the Disney Opera Theater which was the most unique building I ever saw. None of the multiple storied building had right angles and it had a brushed aluminum exterior like a DeLorean car. I noticed the LA Museum of Modern Art right across the road and thought I should go for a visit if I had extra time at the end of the day. My purpose in going downtown was to visit the graphic artists who all had Apple Macs to make sure when I got one they could support it remotely. The woman I visited had been a famous rock musician in her younger years so it was fun to talk to her for a while from the top of one of the biggest buildings in downtown

Los Angeles. I had extra time left over so I visited the art museum next door but that I was greatly disappointed as I should have read about it first before going inside. It was not my kind of art at all as I enjoyed the Getty Museum much more.

## **New York City**

The best business trip of all time was the one I attended in downtown Manhattan, New York City the next spring. I signed up for the conference along with the lead developer and lead business analyst at work. The best thing of all for me was that Bruce Tognazzini was teaching a day long design class. He was the original founder of the Apple Human Interface Group. Just to see him speak was worth the week long trip away from my family. Each morning I went for an early walk to see the city around the hotel which was right across from Grand Central Station. I discovered that the NBA Store was within walking distance, so for lunch I went to see some of the top fifty NBA stars of all time who were visiting for a special event. Another day during lunch I went to see St. Patrick's Cathedral. One evening I went to see the Monet painting at the MOMA, which was the highlight of my trip as I roamed around the best collection of modern art I had ever seen – way better than the modern art museum in Los Angeles. Of course I had to see the Empire State building but the three hour wait was too long for me to go up in it to the top. I also visited Times Square and the Rockefeller center as they were all within walking distance. One day during lunch as I walked down forty-second street I heard cars in the distance with loud speakers making all kinds of noise. Before I knew it, I was caught on the wrong side of the street while the hundreds of identical vans and cars passed by with young Orthodox Jewish boys hanging out of each vehicle shouting and waving at people watching from the sidewalks. It was a surreal thing to see them among the high energy New Yorkers. On evening I walked down to see the UN building and along the way saw many embassies including the Indian one. One day I took the subway in the morning to see Central Park and walked around as long as I could before I had to return for the morning class. It was fun getting caught up in the energy of NYC but I was glad to get back home.

Within a month I returned to New York City to meet a group of friends from India. I felt like a veteran traveler of the NYC subway system but this time I was not going to sightsee but to visit with friends. For one night's adventure, we all went to Jackson Heights to see what the Indian part of NYC looked like. I felt like I was transported into India as even the shops looked the same as they did in India. I went into a couple of shops and noticed one shop keeper was from Bangladesh and even he looked like he stepped right off the plane from Dhaka. I enjoyed every minute walking around and remembering my previous trips to India. I bought some fresh loose leaf tea to take back to the kids in hope they would enjoy tea as it was supposed to taste. For the evening meal we decided to eat in the Jackson Diner. Although the name didn't seem very Indian, the food was very authentic and extremely tasty. Just as in the other stores we visited, I felt like I was in India as we ate in the Diner. The only other subway trip I made was to visit Greenwich Village so I could buy some nostalgic souvenirs for the children. It took me a while to decide what to buy them but I finally found a Beatles Yellow Submarine mug. I also found a small Statue of Liberty for my daughter as well as a cute little NYC stuffed bear. By far the best memories of all was meeting my old friends from India and making new friendships.

We slept in a fairly old building in dormitory style rooms, mostly four to a room. It was a perfect way to catch up with long lost friends. A swami from India also came so most nights I was out in the hall talking to him and that was when the idea of returning to India one more time came up. He urged me to visit him the next January and I put that small seed in the back of my mind to let it germinate and hopefully grow. Another new friend I met was there to play with the band Aradhna. He had such a great friendly disposition and it was easy to talk to him. I noticed his Led Zeppelin T-shirt and commented on it since one of my sons liked that band. I got one of his personal CDs to take back to Texas which I first listened to as I drove from the San Antonio airport. It somehow brought up emotions in me that no other music had done. I visited his web site and realized why he wore a beanie hat the whole time in NYC as he did not want to offend anyone with his wild spiked hair. It just goes to show that God does not look at

the outward appearance but at the heart and this new friend of mine had a big heart. I ordered all of his CDs to show him I supported what he was doing. I still listen to them at work when I need some encouragement and to remind me of our meeting in New York City.

## 40. Time to Leave

While in San Antonio, one of the things we missed were the large green trees of North Carolina. The trees were dwarfed because of the heat and lack of water in the San Antonio area. Driving around town we saw green undergrowth and lawns like we were used to seeing back east. It was definitely not as bad as living in Saudi, but it was one of the first things we noticed was how dry every thing looked. It was not a deciding factor to return east as there were many larger factors that came into play as to why we left.

Our first wake up call came as we prepared to return to Arizona for our Christmas break. We were all set to leave on Friday evening when I arrived home and we received a telephone call from the police. They had our son in custody at the juvenile detention center and said they would call us later with more information and then hung up the phone. Since I had no idea where that building was located, I quickly located a phone book and tried to find it. I called the police station to get more details and finally found the juvenile center was located near the missions part of San Antonio. We had not previously seen the nearly three hundred year old buildings but we drove by them on the way to the center in the dark that night. We heard about them in the local newspaper but never expected to see them in this way. Right before leaving we were told what had taken place at the high school that day. The principal caught our son with a group of drug users. They planted all the drugs on our son when they saw the school official approaching them. He asked our son if they were his but since he never said a word, out of fear of those around or the principal or both, he was guilty due to his speechlessness. The police were called since drugs were involved on the school property and they took him immediately to the juvenile center. We finally saw him when they released him at 8:30 p.m. and we drove home mostly in silence from the shock. We considered not going on vacation but the next morning we decided to go on our trip to Arizona anyway.

We planned to see my mother in Tucson and our best friends in Phoenix and then go up to the Grand Canyon again as the kids were

fairly young the first time we visited it. We wanted to drive through the night again but now we saw boring flat west Texas in the day light. It was hours of flat dry wasteland. The only sights worth noting came when we got close to El Paso and saw the Davis Mountains with wind turbines lining all the ridges on both sides of the road in the distance. It was difficult staying awake seeing the same flat road mile after mile.

In Tucson, we stayed in a small hotel on the retirement community where my mother lived and had a wonderful visit before heading north to see our best friends. Instead of driving on the freeway, this time we decided to take a back road to see the cactus highway as it was called. For miles on end, all we saw were strange looking cactus that only made us want to stay on the road. There was absolutely no way to go into the cactus and ever come out. We decided to enjoy them from afar as we stayed in our car the whole way to Phoenix. Just like our previous visit, we picked up our friends and drove together to a hotel in Williams and saw the Grand Canyon the next morning.

This time we explored more of the road on the southern side of the canyon and took a tour of the first settlers house. We saw a big herd of Elk as we left the main part of the park, which were the biggest deer I had ever seen in the wild. When we reached the eastern most part of the road we decided to hike down a little way into the canyon for the experience. It sparked yet again a desire to want to hike all the way down one day and to float on the river flowing down the canyon.

It was only when we were around our best friend's children that we finally heard our son talk about his episode with the juvenile center. It was not something he ever wanted to do again as it was a barren lonely jail cell and with no information on what would happen to him next. Part of the time he was in hand cuffs. We learned that he had to take biweekly visits to a social worker for six months before he was allowed to return to school and get the offense off his record. The man in charge really did not want to keep him there over night since the two hundred juveniles were mostly very violent and nasty kids. Innocent looking kids like ours only got hurt in there so they always let them go. We were just happy that we had decided to take our

vacation to get away and to help him recover from this traumatic event.

## **Violent crime**

The second event that finally woke us up that we should leave San Antonio happened when we got back from our Christmas vacation. The first hint of trouble came on a Saturday morning as I went out the front door for a morning run in our neighborhood. I stopped when I saw a police officer in our front lawn. I then looked at our next door neighbor's white sports car which had bright red paint all over one side in random patterns. As I approached that neighbor, he told me all four of his tires had been punctured with an ice pick. Then he pointed to a house two doors down and I saw the whole front of the house had been spray painted red, which was called "tagging". The paint mostly covered his double door garage but was also partly on the bricks. It seemed so obvious to me what had happened so I asked the police officer why he did not check on the other neighbor who expressed his dislike for both of these neighbors. The police officer was a friend of our next door neighbor and he knew the whole story of the cul-de-sac battle over words, but without evidence and probable cause he could not enter the man's house and look for evidence of spray paint. It was yet another time I did not feel safe in our house.

The whole situation came to a head later when our next door neighbor was walking down the sidewalk after checking his mail and the other man who did not like him decided to run him down. We just sat down to eat when we saw an ambulance a couple doors down from our house pull up with the lights flashing. The man in his Ford Explorer had run up over the curb and hit our next door neighbor. By the time I got out there to see what was going on, the driver was said he accidentally lost control and hit him. He never said he was sorry but after a few minutes walked away into his house. Yet again, to me, it was obvious what had happened. Unfortunately our next door neighbor suffered multiple injuries. He broke a couple vertebra in his neck and was fortunate not to be permanently paralyzed. He also had a broken arm, leg, and hip. It was traumatic for us as a family and we did not

have any physical injuries at all. I visited him several times in the special physical therapy hospital to show him I cared and was thinking of him. It was hard to see him confined to a wheel chair because of such a stupid event. That is when we made a move to put our house up for sale and move back to North Carolina.

Our oldest son decided to leave San Antonio to return for New Year's Day with his friends in Apex. The only problem was that his car radiator had a crack in it and did not hold water. We tried to seal it with a special liquid sealant from an auto store, but when he got a couple of miles away the car again overheated. Since the radiator was mostly plastic, it could not be repaired so I paid to get it fixed and soon afterwards, he left for the East coast. He drove nonstop on the twenty-two hour long drive and we were amazed that he stayed awake behind the wheel the whole time.

Since we had one less driver, we decided to take a different approach to getting our belongings back to North Carolina. We found a moving company that dropped off a trailer in our driveway, which we loaded by ourselves. When we were done, they picked it up and drove it back east for us. It was almost the same cost as a rental truck if you included the gas, so it was an easy decision to make. We paid a professional painter to make the outside of the house look presentable. Within a month we sold our house for more than we paid for it two years before. Already it was more enjoyable than our move to Texas as we did not have to worry about selling our house from half way across the country. The other wise decision that I forced the family to agree to was to not take any cats with us. One of our cats had kittens again, so we gave the kittens to friends and I was left to dispose of the remaining cats at the local veterinarian. It sounds simple to do and yet San Antonio was having a huge surplus of wild cats so it took some coercion. I did not mind the task as I easily remembered the trip across the country with four cats and did not want to repeat that event a second time.

We decided to take a different route home by going through Memphis, TN to see a good friend who had been with me in India. We all enjoyed Memphis from the start as we stopped to see Mud Island

Memorial after crossing the Mississippi. The boys liked the huge statue of B.B. King in the visitors center and then we let them run around the replica of the Mississippi River on Mud Island which kept them occupied for a long time. We then went downtown where the two older boys and I toured the Gibson Guitar factory, where they mostly made B.B. King hollow body guitars. They were increasingly into guitars and music so it was enjoyable for them to see how a guitar was made from beginning to end. That evening we finally made it to my Indian friend's house to have a wonderful reunion after so many years apart.

The next morning as we left Memphis, we came across more trucks than ever as the freeway was jammed with trucks in both directions for a couple hundred miles. That made sense as Fed-Ex had their main hub in Memphis. I was glad not to be driving a thirty foot rental truck! By the time we reached Nashville, we were ready for a break, so we ate in the McDonald's next to the Grand Ole Opry. I tried to get the kids interested in such a big American tradition, but no one showed any interest so we got back on the freeway and kept driving.

It was exciting to see the Allegheny Mountains shortly after leaving Nashville. It is hard to describe the beauty of the mountains until you have not seen them for a while and have only seen short dusty trees for a long time. Without question that part of North Carolina was the prettiest we saw on our trip, so we admired the beauty around us as we passed through the mountains.

As we finally arrived in Raleigh at the hotel we reserved, our oldest son arrived at the same time. It was totally unexpected for me as we definitely did not have room for him in our small hotel suite. He had been kicked out of this apartment in Wilmington so he had no where to go, so of course we had mercy on him. Because of the crowded conditions and the house hunting expeditions my wife subjected herself to daily, we decided to move into an apartment so we did not feel pressured to find a house quickly. The nicest thing about the three bedroom apartment was the lake and park behind the complex. Every evening we walked around the park for exercise and on the weekends my youngest son and I played basketball on the

courts on the other side of the lake in the park. I had a job working as a contractor for a good friend from April to the end of the year, so the stability of a job while house hunting made us much more relaxed.

# Section Nine

## North Carolina again



## 41. Back to India for music

After getting permission from my wife yet again, I planned to take another trip to India. This time I used a local Indian travel agent who got me a great deal flying on Emirates airlines. It went from JFK in NYC to Dubai to Bombay to Bangalore. I was not too eager to be on a plane for fourteen hours straight on the leg from NYC to Dubai, but the travel agent told me that it was the latest trend to take long flights. I trusted him since he was knowledgeable about these matters. I also knew that Emirates was a great airline. We flew on Gulf Air once while in Saudi and it was a luxurious experience. I was pleasantly surprised that on Emirates airplane each seat had a personal TV with hundreds of Indian movies available. I sat next to a young Indian man from Chennai who watched American movies while I watched Indian movies. We had a great laugh together when we realized what was happening. One of the movies I watched was a Bollywood film called “Black” which was an adaptation of Heller Keller's life story. I was embarrassed to be crying while watching that Indian movie, but I was saved by the fact that my new found Indian friend was asleep and did not see the emotional American crying seated next to him! I decided to pick more light hearted movies from then on, so I watched “Paheli” and even though Shah Rukh Khan cried as usual in the film, I did not let the movie affect me emotionally. When I had enough movies, I turned on the music to listen to Ravi Shankar and quickly fell asleep. We had a few hours layover in Dubai airport so I explored the airport to get some exercise. I found a series of free web access computers in the middle of the concourse and sent my wife an unexpected email. The vast multiple level terminal was perfect for walking, but I took a break and rested before the next shorter leg to Bombay.

When I arrived in India, I waited outside the airport for my ride that was supposed to there and after waiting an hour, the guards who constantly watched me, insisted I call a taxi. I told the prepaid taxi collector to make sure the driver knew where I needed to go. Five taxi drivers did not want to take me as they were not familiar with the location. Finally he found a driver who knew that obscure part of

Bangalore. I paid for the taxi and when I got outside the driver told me he had no idea where it was. He recruited a nearby friend who jumped in front with him and we were off to who knows where. We went down a tiny back alley at 5 a.m. and I thought for sure something bad was about to happen. I found out that the major road was closed due to bridge building so we were following a special detour route. Once we got in the general area, they stopped and asked someone for directions. The fellow told them to go straight and take a left. When we took the left, the driver pulled over and asked someone else, who told them they should have gone right. After turning around they asked again and some guy knew right where it was. After following his directions, it turned out he also did not know where it was either. Finally we found a jeep parked next to the road and we asked him for help. We followed him right to the front gate of the compound and we arrived at 6 a.m. Before leaving the airport, I called and talked to the guard at the front gate and then we lost the connection. On arriving, the guard told me that the phone just went dead and he heard little of what I said. The American couple who arranged to pick me up apologized the next day as their driver said he was there waiting for me, but I never saw him holding up a sign with my name on it. I was the only foreigner arriving at the airport, but I was so tired that it is hard to know if he was there or not. My first reality check that I was India came when I had to take a cold morning bath. At Bangalore's high elevation, it was chilly on my first morning back in India during January. I was desperate to be clean, so I poured the cold water over me quickly to get it over with.

Since I was now in the new Internet powered India, I planned to send email messages daily to my wife to notify her of what I was doing. The first Internet café I entered in the center of Bangalore was called iway, and it had the following sign posted next to the computer I used:

CONGRATULATIONS! You are now on 256 kbps.

Experience True broadband! At just Re. 1/hour more

I decided to go all out and spend the extra 1 Rupee per hour to get super fast Internet to send my email. The exchange rate at the time was \$1 to 44 Rupees. The room was about half the size of a large

American kitchen and had twenty computers sitting in interesting little orange semi-round cubicles. It was January and I expected the room to be cold but it was quite hot and I started to perspire while on the computer. I was dropped off by friends who were running errands and they gave me directions on how to get back to the place where I was staying. Just the sort of adventure I was looking forward to at 10 p.m. I was hoping not to repeat the same problems I had previously and hoped to easily find my temporary home again. The trip back was an event in itself. I hired an auto rickshaw, but the driver got lost as he had no idea where I needed to go. Before I got in the auto, I asked people around me to talk to him to make sure he knew the right direction to go in. After riding for many miles, he stopped and spoke to an elderly man waiting along side the road, as my driver was clearly lost. There was a young man on a motorbike who was also waiting along side the road and he gave elaborate directions that seemed very confusing. The elderly man got into our auto rickshaw to show us the way. Just then the young man's spouse arrived by bus and the motorbike driver decided it was better to show us the way himself. The way was very complicated so I was so happy that he was there to help us. I finally got to bed around 11 p.m. and was wide awake at 3 a.m. I fell back asleep at 5 a.m. and woke up for good at 7 a.m. I had a wonderful cold shower to fully wake me up.

There were two saffron clad sannyasis present where I was staying and I enjoyed talking to them both. One of them was the same Swami I had met in NYC, so it was fun getting reacquainted with him half way around the world. Speaking to both of them on the same day had to make me more holy! He invited me to go with him to Hyderabad, as he said there were several places I needed to see in that city since I had never been there before. Every one told me I had to accompany him as I would surely be entertained. I finally learned the difference between a sadhu and sannyasi from the two experts. A sadhu is a wanderer who leaves his family for a while and then can return to his family again. A Sannyasi on the other hand is beyond caste as he has forsaken the world forever and most orthodox people believe it is a blessing to just have them enter their house. A swami on

the other hand is a sannyasi who passes on knowledge to others. Confusing but very important to facts to know.

One of the Americans, who lived in Bangalore, helped me find gifts for my wife. I met him the last time I was in Bangalore and I had also seen him in NYC. His driver took us downtown to a shop that he frequented when he needed to buy gifts. The first thing the shop keeper showed me was a pure silk dark red King size bed covering. It was the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. When I asked him how much it cost, he said \$450! I told him I needed a something different as it was a bit out of my price range. He brought out all the cotton bed coverings and after seeing around twenty of them I finally picked one, realizing that I had passed up the best one. The shop keeper threw in matching pillow cases for free, or at least that is what he told me. On the way out the door, he showed me a set of pillow covers he was trying to get rid of for 100 Rupees each (about \$2.50), so I had to buy a couple of them as they were so beautiful. I thanked my American friend for taking me to such a lovely store as bargaining was definitely not my strong point.

One of the Indian families I saw in my previous Bangalore visit invited me to their home. I recalled the last time I was at their house as their young children were like wild monkeys climbing all over the furniture in the living room, but at the same time they provided our evening entertainment. This time the children were grown up and while the other men were discussing weighty issues I decided to play caroms, which was all the rage in India among the young people. My wife thankfully gave me bags of candy to give to these children, which they greatly appreciated. I was happy to have such a thoughtful spouse as I would have never thought to take any gifts with me.

My last day in Bangalore was spent at an Aradhna concert in an old unique building near the downtown golf course. I sat in the balcony and had a great view of the crowd below and the Aradhna band members. The small auditorium was full and it was interesting to see how an Aradhna concert was different in India than when they played in America. I did not want to appear as a groupie traveling

around to see them play, but since they were friends of mine I wanted to support them by attending their concert.

That night we stayed with a friend who lived near the airport in his company apartment, so it would be easier for Swamiji and myself to catch our early morning flight to Hyderabad. It was a side of India I had never experienced before as the apartment was one of the nicest in Bangalore. We were in his three bedroom suite with a full kitchen, living room and dining room and I felt like I was in a deluxe western hotel. He was on the top floor over looking the huge pool and tennis courts below. They even had a basketball court at one end of the outdoor area. The whole inside of the apartment complex was hollow without a roof which added to the ambiance of an expensive building for the wealthy. I found out his company paid \$4000 per month for the rent, which was clearly the most expensive place I had ever been in. At 4:30 a.m. the next morning Swamiji and I left the apartment to take a Jet Airways flight to Hyderabad.

The last time I flew in India, I was with my wife and had flown on Indian Airways from Ranchi, Bihar to Kathmandu, Nepal. The airplane was very old and made so much noise on takeoff like it was going to fall apart. At the time, I had heard that Indian Airways had one of the worst flight records in the world. Jet Airways was completely opposite as it was considered by some to be the best internal airline in India. As we waited for our departure I am sure we must have been quite a sight sitting together. Swamiji in his simple saffron robe getting ready to board the best airline along side a tall white foreigner having a wonderful time laughing together. The flight was very comfortable and for breakfast we were served fresh yummy dosas on porcelain plates with metal silverware. Yet again not an experience I was accustomed to while traveling in India.

We were met at the airport by a friend of Swamiji's who was supposedly very well to do. We arrived at his house and after seeing the immaculate apartment the night before, every thing else seemed plain and simple. They lived in a small apartment with his cousin and father-in-law. There was clothes and furniture everywhere, as they were waiting for their house to be completed while they lived in this

temporary location. Shortly after arriving, the owner took me next door to the private super modern college he owned. He had a huge office and for the next two hours I watched as a constant flurry of people came in asking him to sign papers and checks while he was on the phone and computer at the same time. He tried to persuade me to go in business with him as his representative in America. He ran three other businesses including a cotton yarn factory, computer data cleansing, and construction. At one time there were four people in his office all talking on their cell phones at the same time. I found the new India cell phone crazy, which was a new side I had not seen before. He was planning my full day of tourist related activities but had a hard time locating a taxi to take me around. It was the most auspicious day in the last one hundred years, so there were over fifty large weddings going on all over the city that day.

After he finally found a taxi, he assigned a college student to show me around all day who had studied English for many years and yet did not understand my American English at all. Our first stop was the famous Salar Jung Museum which contained artifacts from the King of Hyderabad. It had three floors with only two open to the public and around thirty-eight galleries all together. The most amazing statue I ever saw was in this museum. It was made of marble and represented Rebecca in the Bible. The crazy thing about it was that she was fully veiled and somehow the veil had been carved out of marble as well so you could see Rebecca's face behind the veil. It was enclosed in glass so it was difficult to tell how it could have possibly been made. The other amazing statue was a life size marble statue of a man on the front side and a woman on the back side. Next to it was a statue of a King on the front side and Queen on the back side, made completely out of saffron wood. There were many Italian paintings in one section of the museum and it was so interesting to see my young guide's eyes light up when he saw the realistic oil paintings as he had never seen anything like that before. I took my time walking through so he could marvel at each one. It was the best five Rupees I ever spent so he could see these paintings, but I had to pay the white skin rate of 150 Rupees for my own ticket. Before leaving we had to wait in a large hall for the clock unveiling. I found it odd that a huge crowd

jammed into a small waiting area at noon to see a tiny clock in the front of the room. It delighted all the cheering children when the twelve gong strikes completed on the animated clock, but I found the other parts of the museum much more fascinating.

We then went to the Charminar gate. For some reason the white skin tax was huge in Hyderabad. My student guide paid only five rupees and I paid one hundred for the short climb into the Charminar gate. The cost irritated me as it was nearly the same as the wonderful museum we just visited. All we did was climb a few steps to look out over the old roads below and the large mosque nearby. To amuse my guide and keep him happy, I let him select a place to eat lunch, so he chose a pizza parlor thinking it must be my favorite food.

Our next stop was an ancient twelfth century castle on a hill overlooking Hyderabad, called Golconda Fort. It was an hour long public bus ride from where we ate lunch in the old part of Hyderabad. As we entered the fort area, the bus drove through huge old wooden gates which added to the mystique of the fort. We leisurely walked to the top of the fort and around the green grassy areas at the bottom of the fort. From the top of the stone fort we saw the tombs of all the Kings who lived in the castle below us. It was fun to walk on the steep stone steps and to see the whole country side from the top. After leaving the fort, we decided to look around the ten Qutub Shahi tombs immediately outside the fort as they looked like miniature Taj Mahals. My student tourist guide decided I needed music while walking around the tombs so he turned his cell phone onto a radio frequency so I could enjoy Bollywood tunes with him. It was odd seeing young Muslim men and women holding hands as they walked in the park, as it was mostly empty. We visited each one of the tombs but they were not well kept nor were the grounds as it was dry and dusty. Still the craftsmanship on the five hundred year old buildings was amazing, like a hidden treasure we had found and had to ourselves.

After a full tiring day, we went to his cousin's house, who was also arranging the Aradhna concert in Hyderabad the next day. His two daughters were the cutest things ever so I enjoyed talking to them as they had perfect English. For the evening meal I went out with his

family so the girls could eat French fries. By the time we got back to their home to drop them off, they had warmed up to me and sent me off with the customary “bye uncle” greeting. We then went over to the apartment where I spent the night with a fellow Virginia Tech graduate. We decided to have dinner at 9 p.m. instead of waiting for the Aradhna band members to arrive, and we went to the Paradise Hotel to eat some of the best Hyderabad Biryani anywhere. On the way in my host’s car, I shockingly saw a car with a Virginia Tech bumper sticker!

The next day while waiting for the Aradhna concert in a music hall in Hyderabad, I spoke to the young tabla player. He looked like a teenager but was really twenty-three. He had been playing tabla since he was four years old. He was not a classical tabla player and traveled around the world playing for different groups. After the stage was completely setup, the building owners turned off the power as they had not been paid for the extra electricity to run the hall all afternoon long. We took advantage of the situation and ate an authentic Hyderabad thali supper in a local restaurant. Afterwards when we went back to the hall, I shuffled water and tea back and forth to keep the band members satisfied while waiting for the concert to begin. The chai stall owner on my third visit realized what I was doing and sent his chai boy to carry the hot tea as he was clearly not happy that I was walking back and forth. The hall had more traditional movie theater style seating than the venue in Bangalore. Also there were a row of dignitaries present on the first row when the concert began. All the band members were garlanded with fresh flowers and Chris was presented with a small wooden sitar as a gift. The stage was full of colorful lights like a Christmas tree. Right in the middle of the concert, the power went out in the whole area. After several minutes sitting in the dark, a large diesel generator outside the building was started up to restore power so the concert could finish.

The next day I decided to take an overnight train back to Bangalore the day after, so I could go out into a village for a special Aradhna concert in my guest’s village. We drove in two separate cars for five hours to cover the hundred and fifty kilometers (seventy-five miles). I felt like I was back in the India I recognized so many years

before. The Andra Pradesh countryside was dry and dusty with an occasional rice field or patch of drying red chillies. I had no idea where the water came from to grow such crops in the midst of the dry conditions. Once we reached the village, it was amazing to see the his home which was made of rare teak wood. Aradhna had a concert in the evening for the whole village. There was around one hundred men, women and children present. The kids clapped the whole time and the older men sitting near me did as well. I was told later this was probably the villagers first live musical entertainment. During the concert, the crowd was asked what kind of instrument they thought the sitar was and most of the kids thought it was a guitar! At night we all slept on the hard mud floor and I felt like I did not sleep at all that night. I found it hard to believe that I had slept on such hard ground when I was a youngster traveling around India. One of the American men with us was snoring the minute he laid down so that did not help me fall asleep either. The funniest thing the owner did for us was to buy a western toilet which they placed at the side of the house for the foreign guests to use. The problem was that the wall next to the toilet was only about four feet high and was next to a public dirt road, which made it fully visible to the next door neighbors. It was fine going to the bathroom at night, but I felt odd going in the morning as their neighbor was sweeping her doorstep a few feet away. It was the thought that counted though.

Once we got back to Hyderabad, Swamiji and I took separate trains back to Bangalore. We were supposed to take the same train but we could not get reservations. I had a side berth which was very small, so Swamiji persuaded a young fellow to switch with me so I could lay down and sleep. He was a Muslim and shared his very hot and spicy mutton curry with me once the train left the station. I did not sleep very well even though I was tired from lack of sleep in the village. Swamiji told me how to get a local bus back to the house where I would be staying and where to get an auto rickshaw the last couple of kilometers. I found the house easily from his great directions. In the afternoon the children had a special Mela fund raiser at their school, so I decided to attend for the experience. I rode on the back of their father's motorbike, which was yet another different mode of transportation I had used on this

trip. Most of festival was outside in the red dirt area and the games were created by the children themselves. There were games such things as driving a small remote controlled car around a bumpy track, popping the top off a Limca or Miranda glass bottle, putting a ring around a bottle drink, throwing a loop around free stuff, knocking bottles down with a tennis ball. The only thing I was able to win was holding a clay brick between my forefinger and thumb for one and half minutes! They had tons of homemade food that was very tasty. I spent the healthy sum of three hundred Rupees but the kids really appreciated me being there with them and supporting their school. We returned in the evening and I was determined to get a good night's rest, but one of the local shops decided to start playing Bollywood songs at 5:30 a.m. and I woke up and could not fall back to sleep. I took one last cold bath to force me to stay awake.

The next day was interesting. I was driven to the airport and along the way we stopped for a traffic light and a eunuch approached us wanting money. That was not my choice for my last sight in India for that trip, but my white face attracted such people like a magnet. When we arrived at the ticket counter, I discovered the plane was overbooked. The woman at the Emirates counter did me a huge favor and put me in Business class for the eight hour flight to Dubai. It was a tough way to leave India in such luxury on such a great airline. I was able to sleep the whole way with my feet up and laying almost horizontal in the reclined seat. When I reached Dubai for a second time, I explored more the of the airport. On the lowest level I found a gold jewelry seller and asked about a small bracelet for my wife. The man next to me just bought \$1500 of jewelry so I thought I should start really small. The problem was it was all 22 and 24 caret gold, so the smallest bracelet I could find was \$700. I walked away wishing I could have bought my wife something special like that. Being in the airport was all a very surreal experience after having stayed in a small rural village in India just a couple of nights before. It made the contrast seem even more dramatic. I was glad to arrive back home and to see my wife and daughter waiting for me at the airport. It was always fun to leave for short visits but I was always very happy to be back home with my family.

## 42. Contracting

The last time I had tried working as a contractor, I only survived for six months before feeling the pull of a full time job. This time, a good friend needed my help which made our move back east possible. I took a week of vacation earlier in the year, while still in San Antonio, as a trial run to see if my services were indeed helpful to his company. From that trial week, they approved my full time contract. Initially the team had a couple of months of work to be completed, which was all I needed to pay our bills while looking for a house. We wondered if such a temporary job would hurt our chances of getting a new loan for a house.

The whole family enjoyed the apartment complex where we were living, but we still wanted to find a home in Fuquay Varina so they could attend the same schools they attended before we went to Texas. We finally gave up looking for the perfect home as there was always something that was not right about each house we found. One house had a huge extension behind the house, which I affectionately called the bowling alley, but it smelled moldy inside that house, so it was off the approved list. Another house in the same neighborhood was in immaculate condition but the corner lot was very long and narrow with no back yard, which did not match the kids visions of a huge backyard. A house across the road had an interesting history as it had been moved from a different location and was completely redone inside. The kids did not like the upstairs as it had a very long narrow hallway from the main part of the house to the bonus room above the garage and the yard had no grass at all. We tried to tell them that the grass would be fixed, but the scary hallway was too much of a hurdle for them. We looked at a couple of brand new houses which had great appeal with the fresh paint and the brand new appliances, but the extremely tiny yards were difficult to overcome. A neighbor visibly eating their supper several yards away was definitely not a strong selling point. We were obviously limited by the choices since we wanted to stay within the bounds of the Fuquay school system. After a couple of months we finally gave up and decided to buy a house which

we found was for sale by the owner who built the house. We really liked the backyard and we would benefit from our next door neighbor's large yard behind us making it seem even larger. One of the reasons we wanted a large yard was that the boys had visions of building a shed behind the house for their musical pursuits. I also made the mistake of telling my youngest son that he could have a dog for his birthday that summer when we moved into our house. We surprisingly had no difficulty getting a loan for our new house and before my son's birthday we settled into our new house.

The excitement of moving into a new house is always special and it was perfect timing since summer was upon us and the yard was put to good use. It changed my work habits since my commute time more than doubled. I drove thirty miles one way and I had the privilege of driving through three different school zones each morning. It normally took me around an hour to drive each way to work as I passed through Fuquay Varina, Holy Springs, Apex, Cary, and Durham each day. The traffic was horrible and the office did not open until after 7 a.m. so I could not get to work before that time. On my morning drive, there was no way to totally avoid traffic, so it was an exercise in finding the way with the least amount of waiting. The path I normally followed was constantly under construction as they were making the two lanes into road a divided highway and they finished building it just as my contract expired at the end of the year.

One of the best things about the contract work was not the drive but the people I worked with. Most of them were contracting through the same company and all of them were great to work with. A couple of them were young geniuses who could do any task that was given them, so they were fun to be around. After a couple of months I switched to a different project and was around several other teams working on other projects. Near the end of my project, the fifteen other developers left and found work elsewhere. It was strange to go from a packed building to just the six of us. At the end of the year a major restructuring occurred right before Christmas break where I was let go as were all other contractors.

During the previous year I did usability work, helping the business owner run tests to verify the designs matched the user's work flows. The project was a huge success as the previous attempt had failed miserably when the developers never consulted the users and after a year of building the software no one could figure out how to use it. This time around we followed an iterative approach where we constantly showed the end users what we were building and implemented their suggestions on how to improve it.

In January I helped the same group of contractors at another location in downtown Durham. I had the honor of working with both of the founders directly to come up with a unique solution to a problem they were working on. My primary goal was to come up with designs that matched usability practices I had experienced over many years. It was definitely a great project to work on in a startup environment even though it was just for a couple of weeks. With that job, my contracting work ended yet again.

## 43. No end to troubles

Just because we survived so many teenager troubles in San Antonio, we did not expect for them all to suddenly disappear when we moved back to North Carolina. The first sign came when we arrived at our hotel to find our oldest son waiting for us. We learned he had been kicked out of his Wilmington apartment as they were causing too much loud noise at night. Apparently they were warned a couple of times and then removed from the premises. Not exactly the new start we were hoping for him to make outside of our home. Yet another instance of us not knowing what really happened, but at least we were not financially involved. We heard from the parent of the other teenager involved that she lost her down payment as a result. We were not happy about the whole situation, but we had learned that if you ignore problems they definitely do not go away. For the immediate situation we had to deal with having a full hotel and so we quickly found an apartment in the mean time while we looked for a house. When we found a house to buy in Fuquay, we all moved together. Our two oldest sons got jobs eventually which helped keep them busy and we hoped out of trouble, but it was not to be.

Our oldest son decided to join the Navy as a way to attend college for free. Because he had past trouble with the police involving alcohol, the Navy put him on a three month probation period where they randomly tested him for drugs and alcohol. A week before we took him to the hotel for his final processing for the Navy boot camp in Chicago, he got caught by the police with alcohol in his car as he entered the road into our subdivision. It was a big deal as he was underage and had been caught previously with an open alcohol container in his car. When we dropped him off at the hotel we fully expected him to notify us from Chicago that he had arrived. The next morning, we opened the door after hearing the doorbell, to find him at our doorstep. We heard that the man in charge the night before, asked him if he had any secrets he wanted to tell him about, so our son mentioned his recent run in with the police. That was enough to get him another six month probation period. Since he quit his job and told

all of his friends he was leaving for the Navy, he now had to recover and it took him a while before he found another job.

Right before his six month period was up, he was at the beach with his “friends” for the weekend. My son called them friends as he hung around with them, but my definition of a friend was someone who could be trusted and helped in times of trouble. These “friends” helped him get into trouble each time he was with them and this time was not any different. When my son said he would take care of the ticket that happened near our house, it turned out he lost his driver’s license when he showed up in court. At the beach, his best “friend” decided they needed to buy some smokes at 3 a.m. The problem was that both of them were drunk. Our son decided he was less drunk and drove the vehicle even though he had no license. After leaving the convenience store and driving back to their beach house, the police had a road block setup on the road as they were looking for just these kind of people. They impounded the vehicle and took them both to the police station. While at the police station, my son ran his mouth, so they made him stay overnight in the jail cell and then drove his best “friend” home after processing them both. As punishment, my son had to walk ten miles back to the beach house as the insulted police officers had no desire to help him. What made matters worse was all of this happened three hours from our house. We ended up making that trip many times to take our son to the court house to try to resolve this problem. My wife took him two times, I took him once and then his “friend” took him the last time. The result was that he lost his license for a full year. The outcome was that my son had no hope of joining the Navy as they gave him two chances and he struck out.

We decided to sell our son's car as there was no point in keeping it in the yard for a year with no driver. This caused a big uproar from our son, for who knows what reason. About this time, we got tired of him being around our house doing nothing all the time. He occasionally requested that we take him to his “friends” apartment twenty miles away where he would stay for days at a time. We thought the best solution was to find somewhere to live close to where jobs were located, so he could walk to work. In looking on the web and driving around, we found a room in a house for him to rent. Since he

did not have a job, we paid the down payment for the first month's rent. The strange thing was that the owner of the house was a friend of my wife, who she had met at a woman's Bible study at our church. At the time we signed the lease we did not know this fact. He found a job in a nearby restaurant within a mile of his house. We had a spare bicycle that we gave him so he could ride it to work.

The day he moved into the house was interesting as there were tons of beer cans and liquor bottles everywhere in the kitchen. The house smelled like someone had been smoking it in constantly for years. It was very filthy and dirty beyond what I would feel comfortable living in, but it was not like he had any other choice. His mistakes had forced such a situation upon him and we were trying to make the best of the situation. My wife helped him clean up the house and we put several large black trash bags out along the road. Our son had only one other roommate at the time and in the four bedroom house he had his choice of the remaining rooms, so he picked the large upstairs bedroom above the kitchen.

This time he lasted slightly longer than his previous housing experience. At the beach they had the apartment three months before being removed. This time the owner kicked them all out after six months. We visited him frequently as my wife took him meals and helped him with stuff for his room like a desk and chair. The whole situation deteriorated with every visit we made. The trash pile next to the house seemed to grow every time we saw it. Most of the trash was beer bottles from huge weekend parties they held. We heard all kinds of horror stories, most of which were so bad they were often hard to believe. They found a couple of other roommates, but they were not upstanding citizens either. One of them was an ex-heroin addict. The other one lost his job when he failed to show up two days in a row and then lost his moped when he parked it illegally at the airport where he worked. They did not have money to pay rent so that was what caused the owner to eventually kick them out. It was the wild parties that provoked wild behavior that mostly destroyed the house. We got involved since we did not want to lose our deposit money and damage our credit.

## **Big clean up**

After negotiating with the woman in charge of the lease, we agreed that we would clean out the house during the weekend so it could be leased to someone else starting May 1. We should have looked inside the house before we agreed to such a long weekend of cleaning. She said if we cleaned it up and did everything on her list, then we would get our deposit back, which covered a whole month's rent. We started cleaning on Friday after I got off work. We told our son to meet us there to help us, but he never showed up all weekend long. We borrowed a friend's pickup truck on Saturday as we had so much trash to haul away. Before we started cleaning, there was a whole pickup truck load of trash next to the house, so that was not a good sign of things to come. Initially our goal was to get our son's stuff out of the house and that was the first thing we did on Saturday morning. He did not have anything of much value, but we thought if he moved to another house then he could reuse some of his stuff. It all smelled horrible as it was full of stale nasty smelly smoke. We put all of his stuff in our garage to let it air out as there was no way we were going to put it in our house. Then we started the serious cleaning, but it was mostly just throwing piles of it outside. In the end we took two full truck loads of trash, broken furniture and old alcohol bottles to the county dump. I worked outside the house to mow the lawn and clean all the gutters as they had not been cleaned in a very long time.

After my wife finished cleaning inside, I took over painting our son's bedroom. As I looked around the upstairs rooms, I found huge holes in many of the walls. I fixed the walls by patching the holes with new drywall. It was a general nightmare of filth and destruction everywhere we turned in all the rooms. The most shocking room was the other bedroom upstairs. The fellow who lived in that room was a heavy drug addict and escaped into his closet with drug induced paranoia. The closet walls were covered in dried blood stains and there were holes all over the walls. The closet was a weird shape and not the normal rectangular closet, which was ideal for hiding in the dark. I found many large beer bottles behind the broken walls. It was not fun to clean up his room and to paint his walls. We made it presentable

before our Sunday evening deadline. As I was fixing the two exterior broken windows, the owner and her husband arrived to look at the house. They told me I did not have to do all the work as they were going to gut the whole house inside and out! I was too exhausted to care as I just wanted to finish and go home. After getting rest, it definitely bothered me when I thought about how much work we did for nothing.

## **Joining the Army**

With a second eviction notice and no driver's license, our son moved back into our house. He had to go through a detoxification process after six months of drugs and alcohol, as we did not allow alcohol in our house. After a couple of weeks, he slowly got back to normal, but occasionally returned to see his old "friends", when he could not take our boring clean lifestyle. We insisted he do something instead of laying around our house all the time. After a very long three months, he found that the Army would take him. It was short of a miracle as the commanding office in Raleigh had done the same thing as our son when he was eighteen so he gave our son an exception which he needed to be able to join. Our son really did not have any other choice, but my wife and I were happy that finally some help was coming to provide structure and rules in his life.

On the day before he was to join the Army, we played tennis with two of my other sons. When he got too excited, he drove for a tennis ball and re-injured his right hand. He already had a hand injury from showing off at a friend's house while drinking in the middle of the night and fell off the porch and got a deep cut on his hand. His first comment after our tennis match was that he could not join the Army as his recruiter was coming to our house the next day for a physical test. After the recruiter came and checked on him, we found out that he was returning the next day to take him to an Army doctor. It was almost a trick as it turned out that the recruiter took him directly to the hotel and then he shipped out for the nine week boot camp in Fort Jackson, Columbia, South Carolina. We learned that the Army gave him \$250

to buy things he needed for boot camp since he did not take anything with him for the supposed doctor's appointment.

After completing his intense boot camp, we drove down to attend his graduation ceremony at Hilton field on Fort Jackson. It was Halloween Day, which was certainly a different way to spend that day for our family. It was quite cold at 9 a.m. in the morning when we arrived with the huge crowd for the formal ceremonies. We all sat on the metal bleachers waiting for the big event and due to an accident on the freeway outside the Army base, the ceremonies were delayed and we kept getting colder with each postponement. Finally after a few opening words, we were told to stand and cheer for our soldiers as they ran through the colored smoke bombs in the woods across the field. Through the smoke they lined up in formation in front of us as our son was in the 165th Infantry Brigade, 3rd Battalion, 34th Infantry Regiment, "B" company platoon. This was a very emotional crying experience for both my wife and myself as ten weeks before our son left an undisciplined boy and now stood before us as a man! After the ceremonies, we told him how proud we were that he finished. He told us that he did things he never imagined he was capable of doing. We were glad he did.

We heard about the Army Values that day, which are worthwhile for any person to keep:

**Loyalty** - Bear true faith and allegiance to the U.S. Constitution, the Army, your unit, and other Soldiers

**Duty** - Fulfill your obligations

**Respect** - Treat people as they should be treated

**Selfless Service** - Put the welfare of the nation, the Army, and your subordinates before your own

**Honor** - Live up to all the Army values

**Integrity** - Do what's right, legally and morally

**Personal Courage** - Face fear, danger, or adversity (Physical or Moral)

Since he spent time with us the day after he graduated, we found out some interesting details of his life in boot camp. When he left our house it was all that he could do to run one hundred yards as he smoked heavily for many years. During his physical training, he was able to run two miles in 13:40, which was an amazing feat. The toughest thing for him was dealing with the younger kids in his platoon. The second hardest thing was a twelve mile march with eighty-five pound backpacks and then they had to sleep in the cold for seven nights in wilderness training. The third hardest thing was crawling through a high field with thousands of other soldiers, while real bullets were shot over their heads. The first day with us, he craved M&Ms, ice cream and Starbucks coffee and the highlight of his day was listening to Metallica on his iPod.

Our son had his Advanced Individual Training (AIT) at the same Fort Jackson base, so he did not have to leave like most of the people in his “B” company. We attended his AIT graduation and heard more Army values that could be applied to work or our family outside the Army. I wondered if anyone followed them in the Army, but even so the more I learned about the Army the more I liked it. This is the Army Ethos:

I will always place the mission first

I will never accept defeat

I will never quit

I will never leave a fallen comrade

We learned that our son was leaving for a year in South Korea and had a few days with us before being deployed. It was hard for him to adjust to being around us as he had been totally immersed in non-civilian life for almost six months. He gave in to the urge to be around his drinking buddies before leaving for overseas, and it only made him appear exhausted and drained before his flight. We dropped him off at the airport in relief that he was finally leaving rather than having an emotional parting, which was not the way we envisioned it happening. It was an amazing thing to think of our son being stationed in the same country my wife was born and raised!

## 44. Injuries never end

One of the problems of being physically active and playing sports is that injuries are a given part of your life. I had my share of minor injuries along the way in all the sports I participated in. My wife used to say I was injury prone as I often twisted my ankle playing basketball. When I turned forty years old, I decided to retire from playing basketball since I had escaped all major injuries. The sport may not be a contact sport, but in the places I played, contact happened all the time. From my first cut on my hand just after starting to play at the young age of nine, to the last injury I received when a coworker ran full steam into me as we knocked knees, I was thankful for the lack of serious injuries. There are other forms of pain as well.

When I returned to work for a company I previously worked for, I learned about emotional pain. On the other hand a friend of mine at work died of cancer. I had worked with him for two years and it was a shock to see him so ill when I visited him in his office at work. He suffered during his last year of life and since he had small kids, it made me sad that they would have to live without a father. Sometimes there are no simple answers to such suffering. I considered him a friend since he was willing to share his sadness and happiness with me over the years. He was also a great designer and help create the most usable product at the company where we worked. What shocked me the most was that he was younger than me. Sometimes life just was not fair but it made me want to enjoy every day I had with my own children.

One day my wife gave me an audio CD to listen to in my car on the way to work. I thought it was meant to challenge me to be a better person, but it turned out she must have wanted to publicly embarrass me. It was about a man named David Ring who had Cerebral Palsy, but did not let that stop him from traveling all over America as a motivational speaker. It helped motivate me to cry as I drove and I hoped that no one would see me being too sensitive in public! It was an amazing story of the using the little that God gave him to it's fullest

and to help make other people better. I am motivated by people with fewer God given talents than I have doing much more than I do.

A friend of mine told me a story of his father's recent death and the pain in dealing with the crazy woman his father married at the end of his life because he was lonely. It reminded me of my wife's grandfather as there were many similarities. The first time I met this woman, she was standing by the road outside their house next to a folding card table selling junk in a skimpy bikini. That was shocking to see for a seventy-five year old wrinkly woman. No one in the family called her grandmother as that name was too regal for her. I often helped granddaddy mow his lawn and tend to their large garden. When I became thirsty, I went to their backdoor to enter their kitchen. Some days it was a challenge to find a clean glass and every time I opened the cabinets the cockroaches scattered. Typically I held up the glass to the kitchen window to find many fingerprints all over the unwashed glass. Often my lovely wife came to offer a clean glass of water from our apartment to have mercy on me. Many times we were invited to eat supper with them in their house but we politely refused and insisted a visit to a restaurant was more appropriate.

Some nights when we visited them, she had two or three cigarettes going at the same time with ashes falling on the shag carpet below. We wondered how it was possible that the house had not burned down. The good thing about the deep white shag carpet is that we did not see the filth all around us include the poodle feces in the carpet from their dogs. The strangest thing of all was that my wife's grandfather was one of the most pleasant people to be around. I enjoyed every time I talked to him. I just did not understand why he wanted to marry such a crazy woman. My wife's father told us how immaculately clean the house was always when he grew up in it. Part of the reason came from the death of his wife. There were many eligible fine women at his church but this woman persistently bothered him to date her. Upon granddaddy's death a large moving truck was used just to remove all the yard sale clothes this woman collected over the years and never used. The moral of this story is don't be desperate and lonely as that is a bad combination, but it is easier to talk about it than to avoid it.

That brings me back to physical injuries and illnesses that I experienced over the years. The stress of having problems with our teenager son was more than my body could take while in San Antonio. I heard from a first cousin that he had a brain aneurysm, so all immediate family members were requested to get an MRI brain scan to verify we did not inherit the same physical problem. My sister and I passed without any physical brain abnormalities. Around the same time, I was feeling weak and each time that happened I went to the doctor as I did not want to experience pneumonia again. When the physicians assistant came into the waiting room and checked me he did not find anything unusual. He suggested an EKG since I complained of chest pains similar to what I experienced when I had pneumonia during the time our daughter was born. When he saw the EKG report he immediately panicked and thought I was having a heart attack in front of him. I completely forgot about a test I had many years before where the doctor told me to always keep an EKG with me as I had a very abnormal EKG that constantly changed over time. The P.A. quickly brought in an oxygen tank and put nitroglycerin under my tongue and told me he was calling the ambulance to take me to the hospital. I told him I felt fine and persuaded him to call my wife instead as we only lived about ten minutes away. He refused to let me drive home, so I waited for her to arrive. He suggested I set an appointment with a cardiologist even if I did not go to a hospital emergency room like he suggested. When my wife got to the clinic and the P.A. released me, I drove home!

I scheduled an appointment with a cardiologist in San Antonio and had several tests over the next weeks. Initially I was given a stress test where they found my heart had irregular beats during the intensive part of the running test. The nuclear test also revealed abnormalities. I was then given an ultrasound on my heart called an echocardiogram. Since they still did not find the cause of my abnormal tests, they gave me a heart catheterization. This was probably the worse test I have ever had. It was worse than both of the colonoscopy procedures I had done in Bangladesh. With slight sedation they numbed my thigh region and then stuck a thin plastic tube up my artery until it reached my heart. I was awake for the whole procedure and I am sure the tube

was thin but at the time it felt huge. The tube had a small camera on the end and the doctor showed me what my heart looked like. He finally saw what was believed to be caused my problems as I had a heart aneurysm. I learned later that this condition is typical among runners in Japan as was documented in medical journals! The final test they performed on me was called a Mircovolt T-wave Alternans test, which helped identify those patients who had a high risk of sudden cardiac arrest. The test was negative and so I was told to monitor my aneurysm regularly to make sure it did not grow in size by getting yearly checkups. All of this began from a physician's assistant who falsely thought I was having a heart attack while I was in the doctor's office.

Not quite as painful, but a close second, was the time I had two consecutive bladder infections, which was very unusual for men. The P.A. in the doctor's office in Fuquay thought I had a stricture in my urethra and sent me to see a urologist in Cary. He suggested I have immediate out patient surgery to fix the problem. All was well until I learned I had to have a catheter in my urinary tract for a week afterwards. I was unconscious for the surgery so I was not in pain, but it was quite humiliating being at home for a week with a catheter hanging out of me. I thankfully had no desire to go out in public during that time. I will not enjoy seeing a catheter again as two experiences are enough.

## 45. Bollywood & Hindi (हंदी)

In the middle of January 2007 we had a monumental day when my wife and I attended our first Indian movie at a local movie theater. We tried watching Bollywood movies from a web rental company but the good ones had a long waiting list. The Indian movie industry had changed a lot since I had watched my weekly India films when living in Saudi Arabia. One of the first movies we saw was called “*Eklavya*”, which was shot in Devigarh Palace in Udaipur, Rajasthan, India. We thought that would be a fun place to have a honeymoon since we never really had one. This was one of the movies that I really enjoyed watching as it was more than pure entertainment as it had a good moral point. Of course it had to cover all the emotions like laughing and crying as well as good music that made you want to dance. They took a traditional story from the ancient Mahabharata Hindu scriptures and showed how the same struggles exist in the present time. That same question was a popular topic among my Indian friends in dealing with their American children, should a person follow his dharma or not?

Another thought provoking movie we saw in the same movie theater was called “Provoked”. This was not a popular movie as there were only a couple of other people who were the movie theater with us. The story was atypical in that it was about a true life story of an abused wife who killed her husband. The topic was quite shocking for a Bollywood film since it was not the typical feel good movie. It was interesting that someone tried to cover such a taboo topic. It reminded me of when I first arrived in India and I expected everyone to be very religious. Only to find out that drunkards were common in most villages I visited. I had the strangest misconceptions at such a young age and was about to be educated again. Now that I am older and much wiser with age, I understood that there are good things about each culture and evils either hidden or visible that I don’t want to know about. There are so many good things in Indian culture that I had to come to appreciate as I got to know my Indian friends better. I am a

much better person by taking the time to learn another culture much different from my own.

After Christmas, 2007 we heard about a movie getting good reviews that we considered watching at the local movie theater. A close friend of mine told me one time he did not like movies that invoked emotions as the director was manipulating the audience. However, when watching Bollywood movies it is essential for a good movie to conjure up all the emotions. The movie we saw was called "*Taare Zameen Par*" and it definitely did that! The opening credits were really odd and we wondered what we had paid to see, but by the end of the movie the opening all made perfect sense. I have never wept as much as I did watching that movie, but at least the movie theater was dark so only my wife saw me crying.

One of the reasons I found the movie so emotional was that it directly related to how I felt in the first grade. I had severe learning disabilities due to dyslexia. My first grade teacher hated me and it was a mutual feeling. I caused trouble since I could not sit still and I disrupted the class. On the other hand I loved to draw, but the whole point of first grade was to learn how to read, which I had little interest in doing since it was too hard for me. In the school I attended, by the third grade they decided to put you in either the smart or dumb class as we called it. By the time we reached high school, they already knew who was college material from that decision. My mother was determined not to let me be delegated to the dumb class because of my reading problems. For two years she tutored me using resources from the local library to help those with my disability. Yet another reason to love my mother!

My daughter inherited my disability and thankfully schools are now more understanding and through special reading classes she totally overcame it and by the end of elementary she had to highest grade for reading in her school. Just one hundred years ago we would both have been labeled retarded and who knows what we would have turned out to be.

For these reasons, this movie brought out strong emotions in me as I had lived it and seen my daughter live it also. While watching it,

I thought I had been in that part of India where the boy attended a special school for children with disabilities. I looked up the location of the true story and I had been in that part of Maharashtra near Mahabaleshwar nearly twenty-five years earlier. He attended a school called New Era High School in Panchgani, which I had seen when traveling to Mahabaleshwar. Indeed we live in a small world.

One of the things we like most about Indian movies is that they have a clear point without using bad language or having sexual content; however, this is changing with every new movie release which saddens us. We watched an old 1981 movie called "*Silsila*" and for the time it had shocking subject matter. The main character's brother had premarital sex and his girlfriend became pregnant, which was only revealed at his premature death. His brother, played by the best Indian actor of all time named Amitabh Bachchan, had a choice to either marry his brother's pregnant girl friend or follow his heart's desire to marry his own girl friend. He choose his duty to cover up his brother's adulterous relationship, but regretted it and later on had an adulterous relationship with his original girl friend. Yet another example that the sin's of society all have consequences that span all cultures.

In contrast, soon afterwards we watched a movie called "*Vivah*" that illustrated a perfect premarital engagement process as it was supposed to be lived. Maybe in Indian villages today this still occurs but it was a great movie to see how traditional arranged marriages were intended to work. We have since seen many modern style Bollywood films that show how love marriages are the trend, but "*Vivah*" still reminded me of the Indian I saw.

One of the movies we could both relate to was called "*Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*", which means "Sometimes happy, sometimes sad". It was about how a family interacted with each other and the consequences of their son disobeying the family values. After his father arranged his son's marriage, the son decided to follow his feelings of love for a common woman and it ended up breaking up the family. It amazed me at how such a different culture has so many applicable family values that we can related to.

In one visit to the Indian shop where we rent Bollywood movies, I noticed a holographic poster on the counter of Shah Rukh Khan in the movie “*Rab na bana di jodi*”. I asked the owner if I could have the poster and the next day I posted it on my office door as it was very unique. It showed the two stars as old fashioned people and when you move slightly to the right or left you see them changed completely to high fashion modern dancers. The \$1 we spend on movies rentals from this store was the best entertainment value possible. Because we frequented the store every weekend and came to know the shop owners, my request was fulfilled as he handed me the poster. I was taking a chance as I did not know if the movie was good, but at least the poster was exciting. Several weeks later we saw the movie in the local theater and we were not disappointed as it was very entertaining.

Another movie that we really enjoyed was called “*Nanhe Jaisalmer*” as it was set in Rajasthan. When I lived in India I drove through most of the state and always marveled at the people. It was one big hot dry and very dusty desert, but each village was different from the previous one. In one village the men wore yellow turbans, in the next village they wore green turbans, in the next red turbans and then occasionally the village men would have a mixture of colors in their turbans. The buildings were a drab sandy color, but the people were so colorful as the women wore all kinds of bright colors. Some of the larger towns were colorful as well with Jaipur being the pink city and Jodhpur being the blue city. For these reasons, tourists flock to see the enchanting sites of Rajasthan. In addition the music in “*Nanhe Jaisalmer*” was great and it had a wonderful point to the movie. There were many one liners in the movie that made me think also.

Lastly, for our twenty-sixth wedding anniversary we saw “*Billu Barber*”. Even though it is not on our top twenty-five list maybe it should be. It is movies like this that were the reason we watched Bollywood movies. The music was great and half way through the movie my wife and I were laughing so hard. At the end of the movie we were both crying. We really liked the main point of the movie. Billu was very poor and ashamed to bother a famous movie star who came to town. He was his childhood friend and was played by the famous Shah Rukh Khan. Everyone else in the small village tried to

take advantage of this movie star. Billu's family had to decide if it really mattered whether Billu knew him or not. To watch a wholesome family movie with a great point and to be entertained just is hard to find in western movies.

This is the list of our top twenty-five favorite Bollywood movies:

1. Taara Zameen Par
2. Vivah
3. Jodhaa Akbar
4. Bride and Prejudice
5. Black
6. Provoked
7. Eklavya
8. Guru
9. Paheli
10. Chak de India
11. Dor
12. Veer Zaara
13. Iqbal
14. Lagaan
15. Pinjar
16. Hum Tumhara Hain Sanam
17. Swades
18. Dil se
19. Pardes
20. Hum Dil de Chuke Sanam
21. Fanaa
22. Dilwale Dulhania le Jayenge
23. Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham
24. Nanhe Jaisalmer
25. Rab ne Bana di Jodi

## Cricket & Hindi

When I changed jobs and returned to my current employer, I decided to make two changes. I wanted to learn Hindi and play cricket. There was a group at work who met in the evenings to play cricket, so I bravely told a friend I needed help to learn this complex game. I played baseball for many years in my youth but I wanted to learn cricket as I had only heard about it in India and had never played it. My first task was learning how to bat during my first summer. The following summer I learned how to bowl. One of the reasons they played after work was to prepare for the annual AID cricket tournament in the area. The first year I played in the tournament in Duke and my team members turned out to become way too serious once the practices ended and the real games began. I was only allowed to play in the first game as a fielder and watched the rest of the games from the sidelines. I decided the second year not to let that happen again, so I found another team to be on. It was a much better match as my Gujarati teammates knew they would not win the tournament, so decided from the start to have fun. We had a great time at UNC talking on the sidelines during the game. During our final game I got to bowl against my previous teammates, who did not know I had learned how to bowl. Somehow I got their two best hitters out as their balls were caught in the field. Later in the game I hit a six, which is equivalent to a home run in American baseball, and it was a perfect end to my cricket season for 2008.

During lunchtime on Monday's for two years a friend at work taught me Hindi as we went through Rupert Snell's book called "Teach Yourself Hindi". Initially there were around ten people who came, but after three months there were only two of us left. The second year it was only Vivek teaching me in his office. I am clearly not a linguist as languages do not come easy for me. I learned spoken Bengali while in Bangladesh and was quite fluent. After completing my degree at Virginia Tech and moving to Houston, I found a couple of Bengali friends who helped me learn to read and write Bengali. For the first six months of my Hindi lessons I found it extremely difficult as my forgotten Bengali would pop up when I tried to speak in class.

While in Saudi Arabia I learned how to write Arabic as a Saudi friend gave me a book to teach myself how to read and write Arabic. Learning to read and write a foreign languages was easier for me than speaking. For me, it was like a work of art in drawing each of the letters. I still cannot say I am very good at any other language than English, but at least I can read Hindi now!

I wanted to get my wife something special for her birthday and our anniversary. I contacted a friend in India who had a friend who painted Bollywood style movie posters, but was the last of a dying breed. For Mother's Day the year before, my oldest son came up with an idea to take a photo of all the children together behind our house. He was working at Walgreen's and made an enlarged photo to give to his mother. I sent a digital copy of that photo to my friend in Mumbai. For the background the painter suggested a sandy Rajasthan backdrop. The painting was six feet by four feet and had the following words written in Hindi at the bottom, which was from an Aradhna song that we both liked:

*Prema milana ko nai-na tarase*

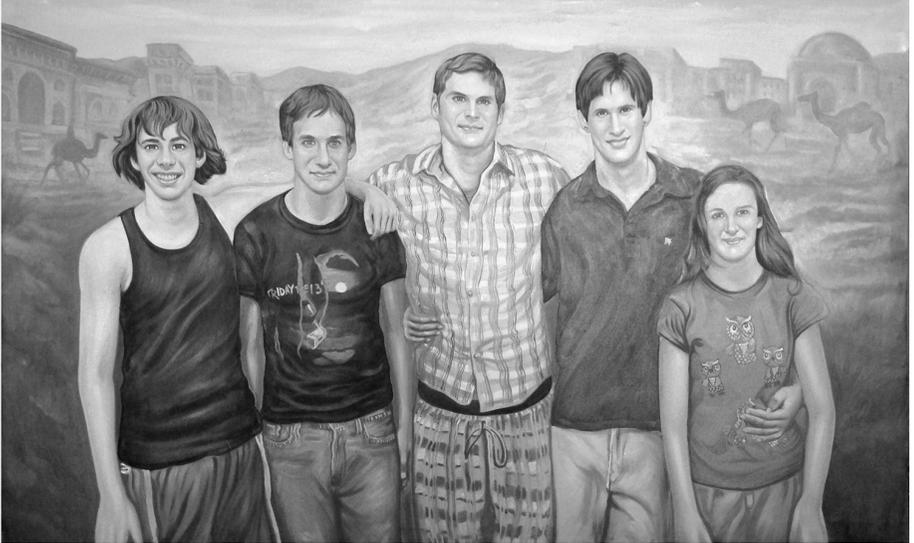
**The eyes long to be united in love**

*Ghaayala mana tori nagari aawata*

**Wounded hearts come to your city**

*Saba eka chana mei swaagata paawata*

**All, in an instant, find welcome**



## 46. Musical Shed

When our oldest son became a teenager, he decided it was time to learn how to play guitar. At the time, the only guitar we had was the one I gave my wife on our first Christmas together. We took that guitar all over the world but it seldom was played until he picked it up. I thought it may have warped from the heat in Saudi, but somehow it survived and stayed in tune. When we moved into our house in Fuquay Varina, we cleaned up the detached shed and installed left over carpet and painted the walls. It became our first music shed. The ceiling inside was slanted and we tried to extend the back wall to give it even more room, but it was not the best looking shed of all time. It was useful in that it had electricity and was about twenty-five feet from the house. Soon after our oldest son started playing, all the other boys decided it was time to become musicians also. For Christmas presents they bought an electric guitar and amplifier with a bass guitar and drum set soon to follow. All the instruments moved to the shed, but it barely damped the sound as we heard the drums clearly in our house. Some days it sounded like they were playing inside our house and we knew our neighbors did not appreciate it either. We had the boys to turn down the guitar amplifiers, but it was impossible to turn down the sound on a drum set. When we moved to San Antonio I am sure our neighbors did not miss us.

As part of the move west, my next to oldest son decided to take his 1972 Rogers drum set with us. Upon arriving in Texas he took it downtown to a pawn shop and used the money to buy a red Joe Satriani signature Ibanez electric guitar. He also found a job in a nearby pizza restaurant, which fueled his guitar related spending. The boys found a friend with custom drum set, which somehow made it into our garage. The more money he earned, the more musical equipment entered the garage. When they played it sounded like they were in our living room playing. We told them they could play while we were not in the house but that they had to stop when we arrived. Our next door neighbor never complained, even though I knew he could hear the music clearly. Most Saturdays he started up his nitrous

oxide induced Z06 Corvette, which sounded like we lived inside a race track. It was not a fair trade as he seldom ran his Corvette more than a couple of minutes.

After six years of musical noise, we decided to take a different route when we moved back to North Carolina. My middle son located \$45 building plans on the Internet from "Just Sheds Inc.", which became the foundation for our sound proof musical shed. The shed plans were for a building twenty feet by twelve feet in size, but my son decided he wanted the inside dimensions to be nineteen feet by fourteen feet and so we faced our first challenge. Calling it a shed does not properly describe what we built. The good thing about building our own shed from scratch was that we built it just the way we wanted it. Through the years, when I made repairs to our houses, the boys always helped me so I knew they would be useful when we started building our shed. The first fall after moving into our house we were all set to begin working on the shed.

Because the shed would be over twelve feet by twelve feet, we had to get a \$65 local building permit. We also needed electricity run to the shed, which we planned to be over sixty feet behind our house. That also required a building permit. While waiting for the official permission to be granted, my son found many people on the Internet who documented how they converted basements, garages and sheds to be sound proof. When I looked at the details, I realized the serious amount of work I had signed up for.

We decided the location for the shed should be as far back from our house as possible on our two acre lot. We did not want to cut any trees down, so we selected a location where the previous owners built a wooden fort for their children. The fun began after we removed all the boards on the fort and found out that the posts had been cemented in the ground three feet below the level ground. I assume it was done to make it hurricane proof, but I will never know. The next challenge was leveling the ground to pour a reinforced concrete slab. We thought the ground was fairly level until we checked and found we had to dig down more than a foot on one end. It took us many weekends to get

the wooden form perfectly level and at right angles for the slab pouring to begin.

One of our neighbors drove a dump truck so I asked him to bring a load of fine gravel on his way home. After leveling the gravel, we put on a thick black plastic water barrier and then laid the metal rebar on top of bricks in the pattern specified in our shed plans. I found a local cement company that was willing to deliver high density concrete. I had no idea what to expect as this was a first for me also. On the appointed day as the driver arrived I found out that it was our responsibility to level the concrete. The driver was willing to tell me how to do it, so I recruited the boys to come help me. Normally this job was not that difficult, but high density concrete is an appropriate name. It was all we could do to get it spread evenly as we all got tired quickly from pushing it around with rakes and shovels. It was far from perfect, which irritated my middle son, but I was just too tired to care as I had to quickly finish the surface before it dried. We placed twelve one foot anchor bolts along the edge which were to secure the wooden frame to the concrete to make it hurricane proof.

After waiting over a week for the concrete to fully dry and cure, we started what we thought would be the easy part. As we drove around we observed working men framing houses and they made it look so easy. I guess that is why they call themselves professionals and we were clearly amateurs. It took us several weeks just to fashion the salt treated two feet by eight feet by fourteen feet boards to the anchor bolts! We never got them fully level and trim and finally had to stop short of perfection and move onto the next step.

I think my son enjoyed framing the most. We ordered all the wood we thought we needed from a local lumber company. He really liked creating the extra thick walls as it was a nonstandard way of framing. There are two things that really help make something sound proof, air and insulation. The idea was that the inside wall was not supposed to touch the outside wall and the same for the ceiling. To achieve such a feat the two feet by four feet wooden studs had to be staggered and offset from each other. Every other stud was to attach to the outside wall and the opposing studs attached to the inside wall. The

gaps between them was to be filled with commercial quality rock wool insulation. Although time consuming, this part of the shed was very straight forward.

We next ran into trouble when we built the rafters. We decided to hand notch them but we found out that lumber is sold in fourteen foot lengths and our shed was twenty-one feet long, so that was clearly more than enough challenge for amateur construction workers like ourselves. We had to patch two heavy beams together and get them braced in place before attaching our rafters. This is when my supervisor son lost interest in helping me as I was making too many mistakes for him. The whole framing process took us a month mostly on weekends and some evenings.

We attached the roof and side sheathing fairly quickly as that was an easy job for us. It was the first time we realized we had a real shed. It was very sturdy and quite sound proof even without the drywall or ceiling. This was when I found out how little I knew about construction. I called the inspector to come look at our shed. When he arrived I found out that I was supposed to call him at each stage as I had missed the first five inspections. He was not thrilled with me, but when he found out I was building a shed for my musical family and I was making it sound proof he approved my inspections.

The next huge task, which was out of our control, was running the electric lines to the shed from our house. I called the electrician who was on our building permit and he came to check on what had to be done. A friend of mine brought a Ditch Witch and helped me dig the ditch from the house to the shed at a depth of eighteen inches. I found the original blueprints for the house and planned the route to avoid the septic drainage field. Half way from the house the gas powered machine ran directly into the sewer line. I was glad I was not behind the wheel when this happened! I quickly called the original owner and he told me that the blue prints on file were changed as the house plan was switched at the last minute. We had to backtrack and start over making a wider path away from the house. Before covering the electrical cable we had to have another inspection to verify the

depth of the ditch. I now knew the correct process so the inspector was happy with me from then on.

I received no help at all in the next step in the shed building process. It was early spring and everyone knew how little fun insulation was to install so they quickly found other things to keep them busy. The dense rock wool that we ordered was the most nasty thing I have ever touched. I was covered head to toe with long clothes along with thick gloves and eye goggles. Somehow the insulation still got on my skin and itched like crazy. I had to weave the rock wool between the wall studs and with every new sheet going in, the shed became more sound proof. It was a happy day when I finished the insulation.

The electrician had to return three times to connect the power inside the shed. In the meantime each time I needed power tools in the shed, I had to run long extension cables from the deck and then pick them up each evening. I was happy when I had real power in the shed, for the next event. Putting up drywall was not as much as I fun as I expected. Maybe it was the extra heavy five-eighths inch fireproof drywall. Then again just as I finished the whole inside, I learned I had to repeat the whole process and put up a second layer! I did not make me feel better when my son told me typical music studios use four layers. To put the drywall on the ceiling, I had to rent a drywall lift. My supervisor son told me the secret for a sound proof ceiling was attaching drywall to metal tracks fastened to the wood joists. The drywall was attached using special screws that went into the metal without penetrating the wood above.

I found a local distributor that sold the same siding that we had on the house, but they told me they only sold to contractors and never directly to homeowners. They gave me a list of people to call and the only one of them returned my call. I told him my son was helping me build a musical shed and he told me he would help me for free! He came to meet our son and look at our shed shortly afterwards. I paid him to order all the materials we needed. He returned a week later and all the children went out to learn how to put up siding. He gave us a quick demo and left us on our own. He returned a week later to help

bend the metal to cover the soffits and roof trim. I would estimate he spent nearly ten hours helping us for free, which was an amazing gift!

After nailing the composite roof shingles by hand on the forty-five degree angled roof, I switched to more enjoyable tasks. The shed had no windows since they cannot be sound proofed. As a result, we had to find a way to pump fresh air through the shed. We found an Air Recovery ventilator on the Internet, as they are normally used in doctor and dentist offices to keep the air fresh and clean. To prevent sound from going out through the air vents in the ceiling we built air dampers that looked like small coffins on top of the air vents in the attic. Inside the air dampers we built baffles using sheets of hard insulation. I then contacted a good friend who installed A/C units professionally to help put in a wall mounted Mini-Split unit. This allowed us to have heat and cold air depending on the time of the year and to have a sealed wall without letting sound go out through the unit. The tubes were built into the wall and the fan was mounted on the ground at the back of the shed.

The final event was putting in carpet and painting the walls. We found extra cheap Berber carpet at a discount store and rented a carpet stretcher. As in most things we watched people install carpet in our houses over the years, but it was a whole different thing doing it ourselves. We had to put in carpet strips into the high density concrete which was not easy. We had to make sure we did not push the carpet stretcher through our walls which was tricky. After the carpet was imperfectly finished, my son helped me install the double doors. This was not side by side doors, but one door on the outside and another door on the inside. The outside door was a standard solid core exterior door and the inside one was a solid wood door. The most unusual item we used in the shed was acoustic caulk. We ordered it on the Internet in mass quantities to fill all the cracks around the door and between each piece of drywall as we put them up.

We started the process of creating a shed in October and finally finished in June, just in time for the end of school summer concerts. The only problem we found was that the super high powered stadium amplifiers that entered our shed vibrate the ground to such an extent

that we can feel it. I am not sure how our kids and their friends stand such a loud noise inside when we can feel it in our house. I think it was a wonderful experience for my boys to learn how to build something of this magnitude. We had plenty of father-son building moments as well.

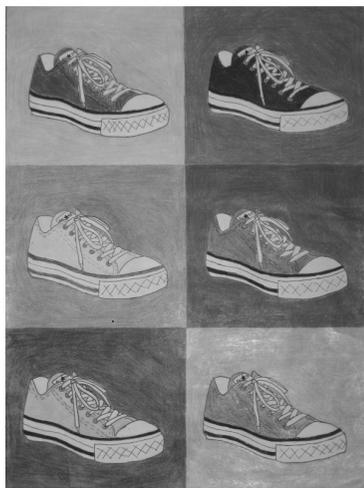
## 47. Artistic Family

I must say that some of our children's character traits were obviously inherited from us, some good and some bad. One such gene that has been passed down from us is the gift of drawing. I remember winning first place in a city wide art contest when I was not yet a teenager. I always liked to draw in great detail the things around me, but that painting was unusual in that it was totally abstract. A friend of my mothers, who was a professional artist, helped me learn how to think abstractly instead of only drawing realistically. I was into race cars so I came up with some ideas of what I thought racing was about and put it on a large canvas. It took me all summer to learn how to paint abstractly, but only a week to complete the final painting.

For several years when the children were young, my wife created several fine oil based masterpieces, none of which she was happy with nor am I allowed to hang them up on the walls in our house. Her best two paintings were good enough for her parent's home, one of which is in their living room in full view for all to see. My mother began oil painting in her seventies when she retired to Tucson, Arizona. They had art classes in the retirement community where she lived and somehow that brought out the hidden artist in her. Since then she has created wonderful desert scenes from the Southwestern part of America. I have some of her paintings in my office at work.

Our oldest son has a wonderful artistic talent, but the problem is he must feel like drawing or painting, which did not happen often. When it did occur, it was amazing what he created from nothing. He has a creative gift that cannot be taught. For many years he created the most entertaining birthday cards for family members. Some people are good at copying what they see around them and with time and attention to detail that is what I was able to do. Somehow he was beyond that and just came up with ideas along with rhyming poems that were truly special to us all. Since the mood did not come along often, it was clearly not possible for him to pursue this as a full time career.

Our next to oldest son also took art classes in high school and did quite well with his projects as he also had the gift of seeing details and being able to duplicate them. Then our middle son hit high school and we found out how talented he was from the contests he won. As in most artists, he does not like what he produces. He also does not want to make a career of it, but there have been rumblings of late that he may try it anyway. Some of the things he does while sitting at his computer and doodling on paper is very good, but he is ready to throw them in the trash when I capture them and mount them on the refrigerator for all the family to see. It looks like we are a family of artists, whether we want to be or not.



## 48. Summary

If I could go back in time I would not change anything that happened in my life. Sure there were some painful moments along the way that I did not enjoy, but that is the beauty of our life on earth in that we cannot predict what will happen to us in the future. Many years of my life I really consider an adventure. With every subsequent visit I make to India, I think of each one fondly as it is so much different from my every day life at the office.

Twenty-five years of marriage and five children later, I have to say that I am a much better person because of them. At times it was a struggle but I had to learn to put others before myself. I am still a big fan of the arranged marriages in India where the families decide who will be the marriage partner as a union of two families. Does it really matter who we marry? Where we learn how to truly love someone who is different from ourselves? I cannot say that there is only one person in the world I could have married, but it certainly made life easier having someone like my wife. She patiently put up with my selfish behavior and was willing to go overseas with me to one of the hardest places on earth for a woman to live. There were times when we struggled in our marriage and were not the most pleasant of company to each other. The biggest turning point of our marriage came when we struggled through the rebellious wild behavior of our children. I can fully understand how hardship can make people separate under the pressure. For us, it brought us closer since we could not fix our children and could only pray that God would protect them through that stage in their lives. We were totally dependent on God as our words to our children were not being heard and had little visual effect. It was a great thing to have a wife close by to talk to while going through such things. Sure I would have rather not experienced the problems, but as a result my wife and I grew much closer. We learned together that ignoring problems never makes them go away and they only get worse over time. Sometimes I wonder how people can survive such times without knowing there is a God always eager to listen to our cry for help. It was times like those that I learned what the word love really

meant. It is easy to love a perfect person, but how about one who makes our live more difficult and that we cannot fix?

I have no idea what the future holds for my family or myself, but now I know that I am able to make it through anything as long as Jesus is there to help me through it. He has helped me in the past and will be there in the future. Everything else is a big unknown but that is why our life is one big adventure.

