

A Selection of Stories and Memories

By Lester Fretz*

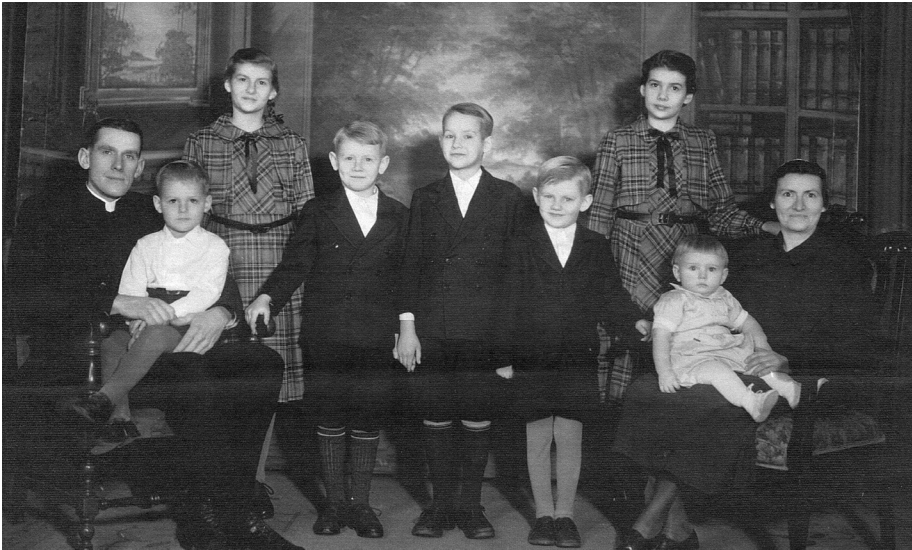
Editor's Note:

Before going to press with these stories, the editor talked to his wife Mary to clarify some details and help write the short biography below. She related a couple of anecdotes that fill in important gaps in the biography and are characteristic of the Lester that many people knew. For example, Lester had written many letters to then-Bishop Roy Sider suggesting ways that the Canadian Conference's finances could be improved. Sider came to him with and stack of all those letters and suggested he should take the job of director of stewardship and fix all the problems. Also, for a time Lester served on the board of the Meridian Credit Union which put him in touch with financial people. It was a paid position, but since he was already being paid by the church, he put all that money in a fund that he used to pay for functions for Brethren in Christ pastors as he traveled throughout the church providing stewardship education and other financial services.

The Sum of My Memories

How far back can I remember? I'm not really sure, but I remember my brother Hubert as an infant being nursed by his mother. I was about two and a half when he was born. This experience gave me one of the first incorrect generalizations in life, because I had assumed women had only one breast as that's all I ever saw my mother using. I also assumed that babies came out of their mother in that same general location since they were fed from that area.

* Lester Fretz served the Brethren in Christ Church in many capacities, especially in financial ministries. As director of stewardship for the Canadian Conference, he worked with the Jacob Engle Foundation (now called the Brethren in Christ Foundation in the US), the Ministers Pension Fund, and other denominational boards and committees in Canada and the US. Before working for the church, he was an elementary school principal and served for a time as chair of the school principals' association. He passed away in December 2020.



The Howard Fretz family. From left to right: Howard, Leroy (on lap), Miriam, Howard Jr. Lester, Lamar, Kathryn, Elva (mother), Hubert (on Elva's lap). Kenny was not yet born.

I remember well when I was three. On my fourth birthday, for some reason I decided to get the mail from the mailbox, and to my delight, there was a birthday card from Grace Graham! During my fourth year, I was given a small area in the garden where I grew tomatoes. Using a child's wagon, I hauled manure from the barn to mulch around the luscious plants.

Early school memories

For some reason, I had to wait until I was seven to begin school. That first day was rather traumatic. We were under the impression that Dad was going to drive the four of us to school, but at a certain point, the girls decided that it was getting too late to wait for him and we should run the half mile across the fields laden with dew. Reaching the school just at 9:00 a.m., Kate dragged me to her seat, the second from the rear on the east side since she was in grade seven. Mim, in grade eight, sat on the west side with Lew Sherk, Sam Winger, and Creighton Zapp.



Class in front of the school where Lester attended with his siblings.

It was Miss Learn's first year of teaching so it took her some time before she came around to check on Kay's little brother. When she discovered that I was not just a visitor for the day, she assigned me to the front seat in the west row with my other grade one classmates: Marlene House, Bobby Ford, and Eugene Winger, a grade one repeater.

Learning came very easy except I did encounter a bit of difficulty remembering how to spell "much." As a grade one, I was allowed to leave at last recess. When I took this privilege, I enjoyed sauntering home talking to myself. On days when I remained until the normal 4:00 p.m. dismissal, I enjoyed listening to the teacher teach music theory as it made so much sense. She taught us that the first letter of each word in the expression "Every Good Boy Does Fine" represented the names of the lines and FACE spelled the names of the spaces. It was also very easy to remember that when the key signature is one flat, doh is in the first space and so on with all of the other key signatures.

When I became a teacher of music, I realized there were other rules governing staff notation. The flat nearest the music is always *fah* and the sharp nearest the music is always *ti*. The sum of the sharps and flats of the same key add up to seven, thus one flat and six sharps would be F and F#. For some reason, most people prefer to play in flats, hence I usually play one sharp as six flats, etc.

Miss Learn was an ideal teacher in so many respects. Using chalk-made stars on a black board chart, one could earn up to three stars a day for good work. A misdemeanor meant that you had to go to the board and remove a star. An accumulation of stars allowed the student to go to Miss Learn's desk, and select a prize from the drawer of rewards, each with a price tag in stars. This system enabled me to obtain the necessary school supplies.

This outstanding teacher had to single me out not many weeks into my first year. Standing firmly in front of the class, she began her stern speech with "Someone in this room has done something very bad," as she glanced my way. Of course, I knew I had done nothing wrong and didn't give her a very attentive glance. "Someone," she said, "Has done something very bad to his desk, and Lester, that means YOU!" Having heard my father often tell how the students carved their initials in their desk, I felt that was an important part of education so I removed the blade from my pencil sharpener and carved, LF, in large letters, in the middle of my desk.

Misunderstanding the teacher's instructions got me into trouble on another occasion. One by one some older boys took the younger boys individually to the basement and told us to get down on our hands and knees. Then they said, "See if you can lift one leg off the floor." This seemed like a simple challenge and when I did it, one of the older guys laughingly said, "That's the way all dogs do!"

When the teacher became aware of this prank, she asked all of the boys to remain behind at recess. Then she explained that some improper behavior had been taking place in the basement and she wanted everyone who was involved in this to remain behind. Knowing that I was entirely innocent of any improper behaviour, I got up and

left the classroom. Later the teacher apprehended me for leaving, and I ended up getting a more severe punishment than the perpetrators.

On another occasion as first baseman, I was responsible for getting Betty out. She yelled, “You son-of-a-bitch!” whereupon I said, “If I’m a son-of-a-bitch, I’d like to know what you are.” Someone then told the teacher that I had sworn. My punishment: stay in for a week. Betty got nothing.

The family rule was, if you get strapped at school, you’ll get another one when you get home. It so happened that one day I was the only member from our family at school. This was an ideal time for Marylou to set me up. Marylou told my sisters that I got the strap. They in turn told my parents. My punishment this time was to stay home from Sam Winger’s shower. Because I enjoyed community showers so much, that was a very severe punishment for a crime I didn’t commit. And I think my mother always believed the girls.



Lester as a teenager at Niagara Christian College.

In those days, the public school drew tremendous crowds for the annual Christmas concert. Recitations, plays, drills, and music constituted the evening's entertainment, climaxed by a visit from Santa, usually played by Burt Fraser. Guest artist Joe Sherk with his guitar sang "The Little Shirt My Mother Made for Me" or "The Wabash Cannon Ball."

At my first Christmas concert I was given a poem to recite. Each verse ended with "I'm waiting for the twenty-sixth." Not until many years later did it dawn on me why the audience laughed when I recited the last line of each verse.

In my second year in high school, the English teacher selected me to represent the grade ten class at the annual oratorical contest. When he read my manuscript entitled, "Electricity on the Farm," he commented, "This is a very humorous line."

I couldn't see anything funny about it; nevertheless when the event came, I took the podium and proceeded to deliver my speech. Mr. McCloed was right. When I spoke that particular line, the audience laughed quite hard. I stopped while they laughed but then couldn't get started again. Although I lost the contest, I learned that I could make an audience laugh and that it was better not to speak verbatim from a manuscript. The embarrassment was only momentary. I came away feeling confident and competent.

Developing confidence and competence

Parents may never know what deters their kids, but the kids never forget! We used to sing around the piano on Sunday night. Then one night when I was going to sing in the Bertie Chorus for the first time, Dad said, "Oh Letch, you're not going to get up in church and sing? What part? Can you stay on tune? Is Louis Climenhage going to sing? You can't get up 'n sing in church yet." Outside on the east side of the church I had a good cry before going into church. James Sider found me. I didn't sing in church that night, nor did I ever sing at home again either. I was finished.

It was a cold, nasty, wintry day when Dad dropped me off at the Stevensville Continuation School and said, as he usually did, "If I'm

not here when you get out, start walking.” When the 3:30 closing time came, he wasn’t there. Neither was the bitter cold northwest wind any less miserable, but I dutifully started walking. Going south for the first mile to the Bowen Road wasn’t so bad, but from then on it was west and into the wind. Up past the Stevensville Road, then Ott Road, and he still hadn’t appeared by the time I reached Winger Road. So on I trudged, my legs growing weary and my stomach a gnawing for lack of food. I was disgusted and disappointed that dad had not come.

Walking along the creek at least gave me something to look at because I always checked any objects or junk beside the road. Getting nearly to Nelse Fretz’s, I stopped to examine a roll of rusty woven wire in the ditch and to my amazement I spotted an animal with a trap attached to its foot caught in the twisted material. It was motionless, so I knew it was dead. Frozen solid! With a quick glance, I recognized it was a mink—a pelt far more valuable than that of a muskrat or skunk which we skinned and sold each spring for a bit of spending money. Seconds later, I had retrieved my prize from its fatal prison and bounded joyfully in the balmy breeze toward home!

The pelt sold for \$15. Municipal wages at that time for a labourer were 65 cents an hour; thus, my windfall for walking that day equaled about three days’ work. Although somewhat surprised, I accepted my mother’s suggestion that I should share part of my unexpected reward with my older brother, Junior. I was equally pleased to be able to place \$1.50 in the church offering the following Sunday after receiving a cheque from the pelt auction.

Occasionally, I was given special privileges. For some reason, Dad selected me to accompany him to attend the Mont Victoria sale in Quebec, which involved taking the train from Welland. Grandpa Fretz drove his two-door, brown Model A Ford to the station that Sunday afternoon when we were to leave. Arriving at the station on King Street just a block north of Ontario Road, Dad first went into the station leaving me in the car with Grandpa.

After several minutes, my father, looking very solemn, came to the car and discussed the matter with his father. From what I could

understand, it was too late in the day to get the reduced rates for weekend travel, so they decided we should forfeit the idea of attending the sale.

The dispersal of the Montvic herd was a turning point in the prices paid for purebred Holstein cattle. The bloodlines of those cattle were soon to be sought after for many years to come. I often wondered if we had attended the sale, maybe Dad would have had the nerve to pay a hefty price for an animal that could have catapulted our farm into notoriety. I always assumed that if the regular train fare was excessive, he may have considered a grandson of Johanna Rag Apple Pabst also out of his price range.¹

But I had other trips to Welland in that two-door Model A. When dad had a bull calf he wished to sell at the auction, we put the animal into a large feed bag and tied it tightly around its neck so its head stuck out, allowing it to breathe easily. Tying its feet together first kept it from escaping from the bag which we placed in the rear with the seat removed.

Accompanying my arthritic grandfather on these trips was an opportunity to take some of my produce to the sale as well. I had made a wooden box in which I put my rabbits or bantam chickens. On the sides of the box which had leather hinges, I bored one-inch breathing holes. My, how my heart would pound when the auctioneer announced he was selling the contents of my box. I always felt he brought the gavel down too quickly when selling my lot.

My dad's skills

Dad had many skills. He was a good carpenter. He was so good that he built a two-story, hip roof barn sixty feet in length clad in metal complete with an automatic watering system that worked on a gravitational system. He could do effective plumbing and soldered neatly. He did electrical wiring when necessary as well as masonry

¹ Editor's note: Johanna Rag Apple Pabst was one of the most influential bulls in Holstein history.

work The gravel for the barn was hauled by horses from Lake Erie in the winter time—a distance of four or five miles.

Over the years, he made improvements in the house for Mother. I always marveled at the curved archway he constructed to replace the parlour door opening into the living room. He removed partitions and laid hardwood flooring. In the kitchen, he installed a porcelain sink complete with an oak shelf hand-carved to fit the edge of the sink. He loved to use oak; therefore the hand-made farm gates were very heavy and so were the living room coffee table and book shelf. Closing in the porch beside the kitchen was a great improvement both from the standpoint of appearance and convenience. The enclosed porch enabled us to park our barn boots there.

Unfortunately, he was not careful with his tools. He tended to toss them into an old army shell box when he was finished using them, so we often talked about building a shop. This idea caught my interest, and I firmly believed it was a real possibility. We even discussed its location. He explained how it would be near the gas well which would supply both heat and water.

Working on the farm with Dad

The year Junior attended Ontario Bible School for his ninth grade, the responsibility to remain at home and help on the farm became my lot. One of the reasons was that I was not big enough to go to high school but I was big enough to work one end of the cross-cut saw. The dream of having a shop gave me the incentive and motivation to go back to the woods day after day during those cold winter months. Working with my father on the numerous and varied farm tasks taught me many useful skills. Using a lever to multiply strength or make a task easier was always a priority. His philosophy was that it's better to use your head than your back.

Loading the logs onto the sleigh was an interesting exercise. Dad wound a chain around the log so the chain came over the top of the mid-section of the log. Parking the sleigh beside the log with pole ramps between the log and the sleigh, he then hooked the horses to

the end of the chain that ran over the sleigh. As the horse pulled on the chain causing it to unwind, the rotating logs rolled up the ramps onto the sleigh. Waiting until the snow conditions were good on the roads, we would put several logs on the sleigh to take them off to the sawmill. If we had to cross a bare road, we sprinkled snow on the surface to reduce the friction.

These oak and elm logs were sawn into lumber, which I envisaged being used to make the “shop beside the gas well.” The lumber was piled in the general vicinity of the proposed location, but over the years, it was used for various needs and the shop never did emerge. Instead, we continued to use the red driving house where a large vice was housed and the tractor house, another building with no door, where small tools hung on the wall or ended up in the military munitions box. I raised rabbits in the corn crib attached to the east side of the tractor house.

I enjoyed accompanying Dad on his visits to other farms with his large pinchers to remove lambs’ tails or neuter a bull calf. He had a black suitcase with equipment to inseminate cattle artificially and was particular about using his microscope to check the sperm count before heading out to a farm. He responded quickly to a farmer’s request to help deliver a calf in a breached position. Here again, we enhanced our mechanical energy with the use of a 2 x 4 across a doorway with a rope attached to the protruding feet of the unborn calf.

But the greatest fun of all was when he got a call to bring the ferrets to a rat-infested building. We not only responded with a ferret or two, but we each took an old broom and positioned ourselves at strategic locations of the building before the ferrets were released into a rat hole. After a few seconds, there would be a thunderous rumble of squealing rats. As they tumbled from the building, we knocked them off with our well-worn brooms. It was more fun than being up to bat in a ball game!

Hunting was dad’s greatest forte. Never did I ever see him use the 410, a modified 41 rifle, but I do recall seeing him use his double-barrel ten-gauge hammer gun pulling both triggers simultaneously as

he shot along the fence on which a flock of starlings perched. Picking up the downed birds, we filled a five-gallon paint pail. He had a keen eye both for surveillance and shooting.

Driving slowly along a deserted road one morning just after a fresh snow had fallen, he suddenly stopped the pickup truck and said, "There's a wolf!" Looking across the ploughed field, I felt he merely spotted a large furrow. Laying the barrel of the gun across the hood and taking careful aim, he pulled the trigger. The rifle cracked followed by a burst of smoke. Across the field, an animal lunged into the air and fell dead to the ground. It was a wolf on which he collected a \$35 bounty.

By mid-morning on the first day of pheasant season, he would have his count. In the fall of the year, the way he could down a quick flying woodcock always intrigued me. He understood trajectory as demonstrated in shooting something across a field and for this reason I felt he would be most interested in the possibility of an earth-launched satellite.

On one of his few visits to our house after Mary and I were married, I explained how a projectile launched from earth at a velocity sufficient to propel it a hundred miles into the outer atmosphere—a distance where gravity would pull it toward earth but due to its distance from earth—would simply fall around the earth. When I completed my explanation, in a very stern voice he cautioned, "Lester, don't believe that stuff!" That was in 1953. A few years later, the Russians launched Sputnik.

More hunting memories

His love of hunting put me in situations that made me hate it. It was most embarrassing when the high school principal would come to me and say, "Your father called and wants you to come home because there's a wolf in the woods!"

I was never allowed to carry a gun as my underage brother was permitted. Instead, I was treated as a dog who would follow the track and chase the animal to the waiting hunter. Reaching the legal age to carry a gun was not a blessing as I then had school work to do on Saturdays when he wanted to take us hunting.

When Junior was twelve, he heard a cock pheasant crow on the opening day of pheasant season. Taking the 22-caliber rifle, he quietly left the house and returned a short time later carrying a beautiful cock pheasant. Of course, he was greatly praised for this accomplishment since normally a shotgun was used to shoot pheasants. I always figured that had I done the same thing, I would have been in big trouble for taking the gun and shooting a pheasant with no license. Junior was rewarded by having his trophy mounted by his father, an accomplished taxidermist.

During the year between my eighth and ninth grades, I did enjoy hunting cottontails but more often I used the arm of my coat sleeve by placing my jacket over a rabbit burrow before putting the ferret into the hole. The rabbit would come bounding out of his home and jump into the sleeve that had the end knotted shut. We hunted with the game warden who carried a small .22 pistol. I guess I enjoyed these outings since Mr. Augustine, the game warden, sometimes handed me his pistol when a rabbit would stop and look at us.

Dad was a very competent taxidermist. Some of his work was on display in the provincial legislature as his technical skills were of excellent quality coupled with the fact that the finished bird or animal looked extremely natural. His work was displayed effectively in cases that a friend in Buffalo painted for him. Since having trophies mounted was a luxury, his business dwindled during the Depression of the thirties.

So engrossed in his art, he could work well into the night to complete a project. It was one of his many talents that he did not teach or pass on to any of his eight children although each of us highly prized the specimens received from his handiwork. I got the woodcocks and Junior got the pair of pheasants in the oval-framed autumn scene.

Trip to Europe

Another of the privileges offered to the second son was the opportunity to travel to Europe accompanying a load of cattle in 1951 as part of the reconstruction of Germany. Cattle buying and exporting was another of dad's businesses; thus, when he heard of Heifer Project,

a relief project of Brethren Service headquartered in New Windsor, Maryland, he became interested in serving the Canadian constituency to secure donated heifers for distribution to German families who had lost all of their cattle during World War II.

During the early 1950s, young men from Canada and the US were given free trips to and from Europe in exchange for serving as attendants on shiploads of horses, cattle, and goats to war-stricken countries.

My opportunity came in November 1951 when I boarded the SS Importer, a freighter of the United States Lines sailing from New York to Bremen, Germany with forty-nine bred heifers in the stern hold. The crossing was greatly slowed due to extremely rough seas, and during this time, three calves were born. When the ship ran out of fresh milk due to the weather-related delay, I was able to supply the officers' dining room with fresh milk on a daily basis. Having no seaman's union membership, I travelled as an officer and was immediately recognized and thanked for this seemingly simple service by a teenage farm boy from Canada, the only British subject on board and jokingly and appreciatively called the "Eskimo."

In retrospect, I figured Dad would really like to have helped in distributing these animals to needy German families; however, he chose to do it vicariously through the son who was far more daring than the oldest sons. Little did I or my parents have any idea what the adventure would result in or entail. Before leaving, Dad sold a cow for \$300 and turned all of the money over to me to cover my expenses while travelling in Europe as he wanted me to visit various families. The term "culture shock" was unknown but I was soon to experience it firsthand.

The only instruction or briefing my father gave was to make me promise that I would not go into Berlin, which involved travelling about one hundred miles through the Russian occupied zone. I reluctantly complied. But I did spend a weekend on a US military base guarding the Iron Curtain near Augsburg; from there I travelled to Dachau, a concentration camp used during the war for exterminating millions of Jews.

Never buying a round-trip ticket, I would study my map and travel onward, stopping in Austria, going south as far as the Adriatic Sea to visit Venice, north and west across Switzerland, to Paris, and back to Germany where, out of money, I went to work on an MCC project.

My homeward bound ship, the SS Harvester, docked in New York on February 13. Everything was very quiet on the piers because it was Lincoln's birthday. To my amazement, however, Thurl Metzger, executive director of Heifer Project appeared. When I inquired how he knew that I was aboard the Harvester, he said, "Oh, we have ways of knowing," but he gave no additional information. He had an exciting offer as he was impressed with the efficiency with which we had handled our shipment of heifers. He offered me a sailing to accompany a load of goats to Israel or hatching eggs to Korea.

Arriving in the Buffalo train terminal with the entire family plus Mary (girlfriend and later my wife) there to greet me was an exciting moment. As the train pulled into the terminal, I was asleep thus a bit groggy as I headed toward the waiting area. I soon came to as I saw my Mary dashing toward me with open arms while the others considerably stood back.

A new car

In 1948, Dad bought a brand new Ford automobile. Already, a few other men at Bertie Church had appeared with new cars—John Ruegg, a local retail grocer, being the first when he purchased a 1946 Hudson. Metal shortages from the war necessitated John driving it temporarily with wooden bumpers until the manufactured ones arrived.

Of course, Dad did not want to attract any attention or be seen as showing off his new car. Always being interested in electricity, I couldn't resist trying a simple experiment so I attached a wire from the horn and ran it up through the floor of the car to the rear of the driver's seat and took that position as we were about to leave church that Sunday morning.

Our family always got into the car at the rear of the church, never at the front. The front was for the elite. In the driver's seat, Dad then

humbly proceeded around the west side of the church whereupon I just gently touched the bared end of the wire to the door handle causing the horn to be grounded as was necessary to make it blow. Gingerly touching it at first, I just caused a mild beep, but as we turned onto the road in view of the people coming out the front door, I gave him a “beep, beep,” at which point Dad pulled to the shoulder thinking someone wanted to pass. By now, I could see my experiment was working effectively, so as they say, I “laid on it!” Dad, very embarrassed about the noisy departure from church, turned and said, “Is that you?” I suppose my countenance gave him the answer. For some reason I was neither punished on the spot nor later when we arrived home.

Learning lessons

I learned a very practical lesson with a spiritual application from my father when I was two or three. It happened at the end of the working day when he released the horses from the barn to the field for the night. I was sitting in the deep trench made by the horses as they left the barn. Dad was unaware that I was playing in that trench when he opened the barn door and gave the horse a slap on its rump as she began to trot toward the field. Seeing me in harm’s way and knowing that horses are reluctant to step on an object, he yelled, “Don’t move!”

Listening to and obeying my father, I froze as that big, black Percheron trotted over me. I can clearly remember seeing those clomping hooves go over my head and the parts of a horse indicating it was a mare who carefully avoided smashing me into the earth. When our heavenly Father tells us to wait, that experience validates those words.

Mother also taught me many valuable lessons. Daffodils grew along the line fence separating our farm from the neighbour to the west. In the springtime, it was common for us to walk the eighth of a mile up the road to pick a bouquet. One time I went too far.

Taking a shovel to the spot where the daffodils grew, I dug up some bulbs and brought them home to plant. When mother discovered how I had trespassed, she immediately told me I had to return the bulbs

to Mrs. Burgar from whose farm the bulbs were taken. I thought that merely sticking the bulbs back into the ground should have sufficed to cover my behaviour, but no, I had to take them back to Nellie, as we lovingly called her.

Although I often enjoyed walking to the Burgars to buy butter, returning the bulbs was drudgery because I feared how Nellie might react. I certainly didn't want to have a fall-out with her as she always offered me candy when I made the weekly trip to buy butter. Nellie was most understanding. She told me I could keep the bulbs and then took me to her lovely flower garden and offered me additional plants.

This was only the beginning of many trips to Nellie's garden where she would tell me the names of her various flowers. She bent the stem so the flower would tilt toward me. At first, I thought *sapiglosis*, *scabiosa*, and *delphiniums* were odd names but they soon became part of my vocabulary and in no time, I had imbibed her love for flowers.

Mother's cooking and sewing

Mother was an outstanding cook into her nineties. Although money was scarce, we always ate well. During the winter months, quarters of beef hung in the summer kitchen, an unheated room used for cooking during the summer. At lunch time, Mother would tell Dad what cut of meat she wanted for supper. My, how she could grill a steak! In the summer we enjoyed the beef she had canned when it became too warm to carve a roast from the well-cured carcass.

Corn, which she dried during the summer and stored in a cotton sugar bag, was a special winter treat. Her vegetables always were superb because she was liberal with butter and sugar. She could take simple vegetables such as cucumbers or cabbage and make the tastiest sliced cucumbers or coleslaw. Her delicious dinners were topped off with deep-dish berry pies. Frequently she asked for cream to be skimmed and brought to the house; it made lettuce salad special, and occasionally we made homemade ice cream. Fried bologna was an enjoyable Saturday noon lunch, while a Sunday evening treat was cherry tapioca and. In the fall of the year, roast duck was really a treat.

During camp meeting at Ontario Bible School in the summer, Dad insisted that Mother prepare a picnic lunch for the family to eat beside the Niagara River. Not until I grew up did I realize that Dad insisted on this because her fried chicken and potato salad were so superior to the camp meeting menu. Because of our financial situation, I had assumed we had to eat by the river because Dad couldn't afford to put enough money into the free will offering container for the entire family.

Mother was also a good seamstress. Sugar or flour bags were sometimes used to make clothing. She never knitted but she could really make her sewing machine hum. Her green darning bulb had a piece broken off but that didn't deter her from keeping our socks and mittens in wearable condition.

She likely was as disappointed as I when I put on the red corduroy sports jacket she made for our honeymoon. Unfortunately, the back pieces were cut in such a way that one piece was inverted so the sheen on the two halves was dissimilar. Nevertheless, I proudly wore it as we left in our little green 1949 Hillman Minx for Oxtongue Lake near Algonquin Park.

As we sat beneath the pear tree to pod peas or clean elderberries, we visited or simply listened to her philosophize. Although I don't recall how old I was, the memory of telling her that I wanted to accept Jesus as a young child is very clear. She was sitting in the kitchen beneath the telephone on the wall when I crawled up on her lap and explained how desperately I was under conviction.

Dad was a very strict disciplinarian. We tended to laugh when Mother would try to dish out physical punishment; however, I often was surprised that she didn't intervene for us when our father went too far. But that demonstrated her commitment to him. Neither of them showed any interest in our high school education, and of course much less in university work, but they surprised me by showing up at the 1969 State University College at Buffalo convocation when I received my Master of Science degree in education.

Often on Sunday afternoons when we dropped in for a visit, Mother tended to interrupt me when I attempted to share some of my

endeavours by telling me that “Junior had a cow graded ‘Very Good’ this week,” or “The milk inspectors have been here.” Unfortunately, we were told on our return from Africa that they did not babysit grandchildren, thus Sandi never experienced going to the farm for a few days.

Close calls

I’ve had a few close calls. One winter day when I was about twelve, I went to the creek to check out the ice where we often played hockey with the neighbour boys. When I reached the middle of the creek, the ice broke through and down I went, clutching the edge of the jagged ice.

I knew nothing of hypothermia but only thought about the pocket watch I was wearing that was in my bib overalls watch pocket. I didn’t want that Christmas present to get wet so I kept trying to pull myself up onto the ice which continued to break off. Finally, I stretched my arms as far as possible spreading my weight over a broader area and was able to make it to the ice surface. As I ran for home, my clothing soon became frozen stiff but my watch was still ticking!

Another time, as I was approaching the top of the Vineland hill, an oncoming vehicle attempted to pass another car as we were meeting. Trying to avoid a head-on collision, I pulled over but could not avoid being side swiped by this aggressive driver and then rolled my VW into the ditch. Shaken up and down on the passenger’s side of the car, it took me a little while until I was able to open the door upward. By the time I was able to lift the door into the air, several cars had stopped on either side of the road, but the occupants merely stood silently beside their automobiles rather than come to my assistance. As I crawled out, I then realized why everyone appeared so stunned. A hearse was parked directly across the road, obviously the first vehicle to come along following the accident. Its presence conveyed an incorrect message to the bystanders.

The day our niece Cathy was to be married provided another unforgettable experience. The extension cord to the upright freezer

next to the laundry tub had had the ground prong removed. Earlier in the day, the washing machine suds saver had overflowed, leaving the floor in the laundry room quite wet.

As we were getting dressed to attend the Fretz-deWaard wedding, I went to check on the freezer. When I grasped the freezer door still in my sock feet, an extremely powerful electric shock sent a spasm into my hand. My hand clamped shut to the handle making it impossible to open my fingers and release my hand which seemed to be welded to the handle. The shock moved from my hand and slowly up my arm. I tried to call Mary for help. All that I could utter was merely a “Ma-a-a” which sounded like a suffering sheet bleating.

The spasm continued to move up my arm. As it neared my shoulder, I thought, “If I’m electrocuted, I do hope that the news doesn’t get out before the wedding so it doesn’t spoil their day.” Thinking that if the spasm would reach my heart and take my life, I threw my body backwards so hard that the freezer lurched toward me. Fortunately, the weight of my body against the weight of the freezer allowed my hand to be pulled free. Although a bit weak for the remainder of the day, I suffered no ill effect.

On another gorgeous July morning in the early 2000s, Tony, our neighbour, came over with his fishing equipment. We put the 9.9 Johnson on the 12-foot car top boat and trolled up and back to the lighthouse, landing two nice small mouth bass. The motor had run nicely but the turning mechanism was stiff, which caused an abrupt turn to the port as we headed for our cottage along the lake. Because I was seated on the starboard side, the boat dipped to my side taking on some water which caused us to tip even further. And then we went under!

When we surfaced, I was amazed how far Tony had to swim to retrieve his life jacket. Fortunately, I was wearing mine. I managed to grab hold of the bow of the boat with one hand, and for some reason, one of my fish with the other. After a few minutes floating in the water hoping we would be seen by someone on shore, I asked Tony if he thought I should keep the fish. I guess this stupid act indicated that I was in shock.

Tony swam to shore and the marina owner came and picked me up. Having been in the water for a while, I had great difficulty in climbing into his boat. He brought my boat up, towed it to shore, and serviced my motor. Unfortunately, I had lost the tackle box I had had for fifty years. Indeed, the Lord had again been good to me and demonstrated his present help in time of trouble.

A Christmas to remember

In the mid 1930s, in December, our parents with their six children were trying desperately to cope with the dreaded Depression. As Christmas approached that year, not only was there no money for presents, but there wasn't even any snow!

The bare ploughed fields of Bertie Township had a bleak, dismal appearance which further dampened our spirits. But then one morning, we awoke to a blanket of newly fallen snow covering the countryside. My father, an avid hunter and excellent marksman took his 12-gauge, double-barreled shotgun and headed for the fields. Tracking couldn't have been better. Soon, shots echoed from the fields and our hopes began to rise.

It was as if God had provided for our Christmas by sending the snow. Later in the day, Dad returned with several jack rabbits that he took to a butcher shop in Fort Erie. From the sale of his hunt, he bought a used sleigh, longer than the average sleigh—a Christmas present for his four sons who were less than four years apart in ages. We had hours of fun sledding down the barn hill with three guys on the sleigh as the fourth brother gave the starting push.

Time eventually took its toll on the sleigh but the memory of that unexpected Christmas gift and how it came about in times of hardship lingers on with love and appreciation.

Travelling together

Mary Olevia Gilmore and I were married just five months after I returned from Europe. Our first trip together was to Algonquin Park where we honeymooned at Oxtongue Lake. Over the years we



*Mary and Lester Fretz on their wedding day,
August 19, 1952.*

had enjoyable trips together ferrying from Quinte Island to the mainland and from Tobermory to Manitoulin Island. In British Columbia, travelling on Highway 23, our trip was interrupted with a ferry ride across a lake. We made four trips between Vancouver and Vancouver Island on a ferry, and when we visited Prince Edward Island, a ferry was the only way to get there. Other islands where we have stayed are Salt Spring Island, Jekyll Island, Cuba, and Manitoulin Island. As a child, I figured we always took the ferry to Buffalo since it was likely a lower fare than the Peace Bridge.

In Paris, we visited Napoleon's tomb, and in London we saw where David Livingstone's body was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey. Arlington Cemetery is an impressive site but a stark reminder of the folly of war. We climbed the Matopo Hills in Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) to see where the granite rock was carved out for Cecil John Rhodes's grave, and in Egypt, we went down into the tombs of the Pharaohs. Tradition has it that Mark was buried in Venice, probably at St. Marco's Square. The empty tomb in Jerusalem where the deceased Jesus had lain before his resurrection was the most exciting of all. These visits were in conjunction with our trip to Africa in 1959.

Having taught up until Christmas holidays in St. Catherines, we flew from Malton Airport where many friends and family members saw us off for a two-year voluntary service assignment at Mtshabezi Teacher Training Institute in Southern Rhodesia. Air travel in those

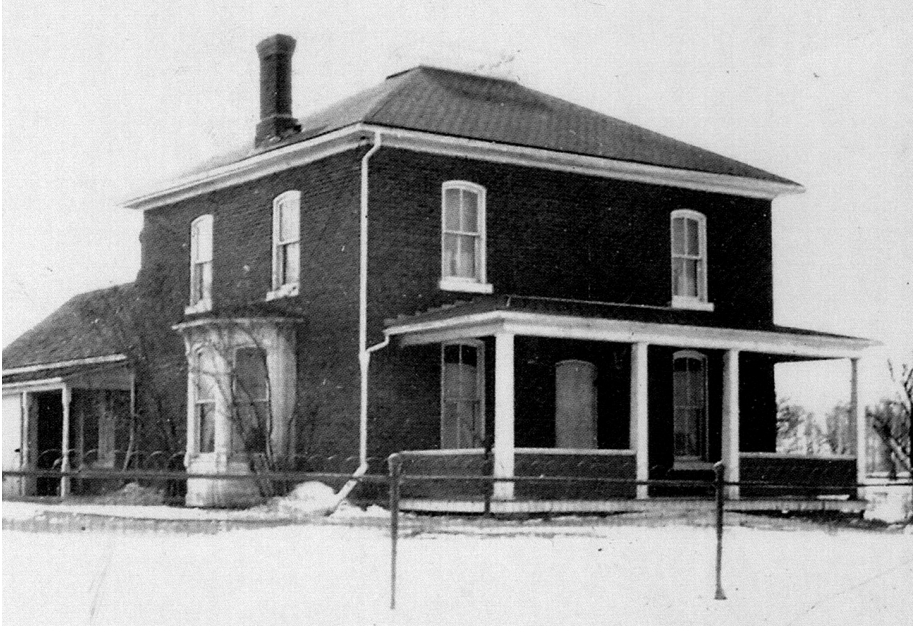
days catered to the traveler; thus we were treated to a sumptuous breakfast in Shannon, Ireland before taking a three-day stop-over in London, England. In Belgium, we toured the battlefield at Waterloo and then on to Paris for a couple of days. Stopping over in Geneva, we attended a Pentecostal church service, strolled beside Lake Geneva and travelled with locals to a ski resort before hopping on to Milan to see de Vinci's painting of the Last Supper.

Our only non-air segment of this trip was taking the train for sightseeing in Venice before flying DC3 service to Rome. In St. Peter's Basilica I touched both of Peter's big toes. We enjoyed a lovely view of the Mediterranean as we dined from a penthouse restaurant in Beirut on an overnight stop before stopping in Jordan to visit Lorne and Lois Ruegg who were on assignment with MCC. Our next stopover was in Cairo. By then we were growing weary of stopovers and sightseeing, so we cancelled our scheduled stop in Addis Ababa and flew directly to Nairobi, spending the night there before completing our trip to Bulawayo, Southern Rhodesia.

Up Home

I believe I stayed overnight at Grandpa Fretz's more than any of my brothers; I don't know about the girls. Throughout my public school days, I was designated to mow their lawn more than any of my other siblings. I always figured Junior didn't like being away from home overnight whereas I was glad for the change. I enjoyed walking home from school with different kids, to say nothing of getting an immense lunch from Nana for school the next day.

Going directly from school, it was my job to mow the lawn before supper. The lawn mower was kept under the west step beside the summer kitchen. The handle was always extended to the south. It wasn't as good a mower as Dad's but with a lot of pushing it back and forth, I could get the grass mowed. Often, the lawn had become too long which made the work even harder. Occasionally, Grandpa came out with a file and some oil to try to make it cut better. The handle had been broken at one time, so it had an extra piece on it where it was



Fretz Farm, Sherk Road, Stevensville, Ontario—where it all began. Lester's brother, Howard Jr., still lives on this farm.

repaired. It even had a different sound than Dad's. From an early age, I got the feeling that he was a bit better off than Grandpa but this didn't affect my appreciation of or loyalty to either of them.

The lawn "up home" had various weeds or old-fashioned plants. When I mowed into them, there were certain odors given off—smells unlike I ever sensed anywhere else. On the east side of the verandah was the trumpet vine. Stopping for a rest, I would pull off some of those orange flowers and blow into them. There was also the big cast iron implement wheel beneath the tree at the garden's edge. Well do I remember being cautioned never to lift it up. Not until years later did I learn of its memorial significance to my aunt and uncle who lived at Reeb's Bay west of Port Colborne.

Eating supper on one of these overnights did not compare with the sumptuous Sunday dinners that Nana could cook, but they were still

special. I always enjoyed her stewed tomatoes and Grandpa's meat that he had cured in the little smoke house located between the woodshed and the outhouse. Her lemon pie was just a Sunday dessert so we settled for her homemade cookies or canned fruit on a week night.

Grandpa usually killed a chicken on Saturday when the family was invited for Sunday noon. The mashed potatoes were so creamy, the gravy so flavourful, and the dressing was seasoned just right, to say nothing of the salad dressing on her leaf lettuce or the mound of meringue on the deep lemon pie. On Sundays I always sat at the southeast corner of the table on Grandpa's right. This place of honour made me feel special.

Following the lawn mowing, the evenings after supper were spent around the coal-oil lamp playing cat [a form of tic-tac-toe] with Nana. I used to think I was pretty good, but as I got older and saw her play with younger brothers, I realized that she "threw" many a game. Sometimes she got out the special lamp that had a fabric mantel. I forget what the lamp was called but it gave off a much brighter light. Grandpa sat in his captain's chair and read the paper with an occasional chuckle as he read his favourite comics such as Popeye or the Kats 'n Jammer Kids. He often pumped me with questions about Dad.

Although they did not have the convenience of electricity, they had a radio with a large horn for a speaker and it operated on batteries. We were not allowed to turn it on because it would drain the batteries. Sometimes, it operated on dry cells and other times grandpa removed the car battery for a source of six-volt power.

Grandpa and Nana were great gardeners. Because he spaded the entire garden each year filling the trenches with manure, the garden was probably six to eight inches above the paths that separated the plots. They used strings to keep their rows straight and a board they stood on to prevent the ground from becoming compacted. Nana's creamed garden peas were always a treat! There were cherry-like fruits in the garden that we ate after removing a paper-like covering. These ground cherries came up annually without being seeded.

Although comic books were frowned on in those days, Nana (or

perhaps it was Uncle Clarence) made her own for us by pasting the funnies, cut from the newspaper, into a discarded catalogue. These improvised comic books were kept in the cubby hole, a small room beneath the stairway.

Eventually Nana would announce it was time to go “up the wooden hill” (i.e., upstairs). Coal oil lamps seemed superior to electric lights because after being tucked in, she left the lamp on the dresser turned very low. It went out automatically after I had gone to sleep. Of course, before she left to go down the creaky stairs, she reminded me that the chamber (as she called it) was under the bed and then say, “Night, night, don’t let the bed-bugs bite.” In the dimly lit room as the flame flickered lower and lower, I enjoyed gazing at the rows of Uncle Clarence’s books on the shelves as I dozed off.

The sounds of Grandpa sliding the top off the stove and breaking up kindling would awaken me in the morning. I listened for the sound of him striking a match and then enjoy the crackling of the cedar beginning to burn and could judge when it was warm enough to go down for a big breakfast. The water reservoir on the side of the big black stove provided warm water for washing in the sink beside the hand pump.

Later, I was handed my lunch pail weighted down with more food than I could possibly eat. But there were always bigger boys like Chris Hardwick or Jerry Sherk who were ready for a jam sandwich to help me out. Nana insisted on giving me four sandwiches when I usually only ate two. She also used more wax paper than my mother and there was a bigger variety of things. Seeing what was in my pail was the final pay-off for one of those interesting nights away.

On the morning of March 8, 1939 for a reason unknown to me, Hubert, Lamar, and I were whisked off “up home.” We hadn’t even had breakfast, so Nana began to prepare some for us. As she broke the eggs into her cast iron frying pan, one was a double-yoked egg. Lamar and Hubert immediately began to argue over who was going to have it. I sat quietly and patiently waiting for breakfast to be served. To my delight, Nana, with a wink in my direction, slid the double-yoked egg

onto my plate. What a great lesson and conditioning! Later in the day, Dad appeared with a broad grin on his face and announced another boy had arrived. Within the next couple of days, the new baby was given the name Leroy Joseph.

Picking wild strawberries with Nana was a delight, but I thought she was so wasteful. She took a large aluminum cooking pot that she soon filled by breaking off the entire stem of berries. We would return from the cemetery or along the road to the east where we usually picked, and then seated on a comfortable chair beneath a shade tree in the yard, we cleaned the berries as we visited. I never confronted her about the number of immature berries she discarded.

Not until I got older did I deduce it was much easier for an older person to pick the way she did, nor was she wasting berries either. They eventually would have dried up in the hot sun. The smell of that jam permeated the summer kitchen where she processed our pickings on a kerosene stove. The thick, sweet jam was really delicious.

Her lemon drink always touched the spot too. About mid-afternoon when we finished unloading hay, we would hear her carefully climbing the stairs that led to the upper barn floor carrying a large kettle of that special drink.

As I grew older, I continued to have a close relationship with Grandpa. Although extremely crippled with arthritis and unable to walk except with the use of two canes, he could mow or rake hay if I took a team to him and hook the horses to the equipment he wished to use. I then played in the field where he was working and assisted him at lunch time by unhitching the horses, putting them into the barn with water and feed while we ate lunch. He and I also removed thorn apple trees from fence rows and trimmed the raspberries each year after the crop was finished. Unless he insisted otherwise due to the weather, I walked slowly with him to and from the barn where he milked a half dozen cows. If it was dark, his lantern swung from the handle of the cart he pushed.

His handicap always forced him to think of an easier way to do things. This too was great training. He often suggested using a lever

to lift or pry something that was too heavy for us to lift. He used a rope and pulley to lift the milk cans from the water trough where the milk was cooled. One summer, we worked for several days beneath the combine installing a set of tandem wheels. He pointed out the most efficient way to use a cold chisel or remove a stubborn rivet. He indicated exactly where I should place the crowbar to force the metal braces into place. When we crawled from our cramped quarters, it was easy to see the pain he suffered trying to pull himself to a standing position, but he never complained.

His condition forced him to innovate. To carry his tools, milk, eggs, etc., he pushed a baby carriage or a long three-wheeled cart on his trips to and from the barn. Rather than make unnecessary trips to check when the water trough was full, he simply counted the strokes as he pumped. He wanted the trough to be full but he didn't want it to run over because it made the barnyard muddy. He couldn't climb into the hay mow, so he used the claws from a hay loader attached to a very long handle. With this contraption, he could stand on the barn floor and pull the hay from the mow. Because of the way he used his arms, he developed very strong muscles in them.

Once, when he was involved in a minor automobile accident, he simply got out of his car and stood, leaning against the car with his canes inside the car. When the investigating officer arrived, Grandpa made no attempt to walk around but merely remained standing with his usual very sober, pleasant, placid look on his face, thus concealing his handicap which may have been mistakenly understood. Once again, his innovative mind mitigated the situation as he desperately needed to be able to drive.

If the cows didn't come when he called (and my how he could call them!) he got into his Model A and drove into the field for them. When he wanted to cure a ham or a side of bacon, he drove to a particular hickory tree in the middle of a certain field and removed some loose bark for the smouldering fire. When there was a young calf that needed to be taken to the stock sale in Welland, he removed the rear seat so he could put the calf in the back of his two-door car.

He had a good Sunday cane, but through the week, he used canes he made. His preference was a hickory cane because they were strong and easily made. He “grew” them in advance by bending a hickory sapling in a complete circle, tied it in position and then returned a year or two later to “harvest” his personalized cane. He was not reluctant to use those canes to elicit the behaviour he wanted from his animals. In order for him to function, his livestock had to know and practice their routines.

He was never critical of things I did that I should not have done. He had a unique way of correcting when boys did wrong. One day we were playing in his Model A by putting it in low gear and pushing the starter to make the car move. Later in the day he casually remarked, “A person should never push the starter on a car when it’s in gear.” He could speak firmly if the occasion called for it.

As his health deteriorated and he no longer drove, I became his chauffeur picking Nana and him up for church on Sunday, or driving him to his appointment with Dr. Macey during the week. Following his check-up, I stopped at Brodies to pick up his prescriptions. Whenever I inquired about the results of his doctor’s visit, he merely gave me a vague reply.

During the summer that I was sixteen years of age, I enjoyed working with Bruce Sider, an electrician. I was so pleased to learn how to wire and also glad to help my grandparents get electricity, something that indeed made their lives much better. About the same time, Dad installed natural gas for them.

One Sunday while delivering Grandpa to the back door of Bertie church, I thought he was away from the car and I started to drive off. To my surprise, he was still standing beside the open rear door that opened forward. The moving door pushed him down on the driveway and by time I stopped, jumped out, and ran to his assistance, he was getting up nonchalantly brushing the dust from his dark suit and calmly saying, “Oh, I’m all right.” I felt badly and was embarrassed but appreciated his unaccusing manner.

When I returned from my European trip in 1952, he was confined to bed. Although his vision was not good, I set the slide projector on his bed and showed him slides I had taken. It was apparent he had trouble seeing the slides, so I explained each one to him. In his typical way, he made positive comments and showed a genuine interest throughout what was likely a tiring evening. Returning to complete my grade thirteen year at Niagara Christian College, I continued to use his car on a daily basis. The fabric on the roof had come loose at the front so the wind made it balloon as I drove. The brakes were not very good and sometimes I stopped at a farmhouse along the way to get water for the radiator. But it got me to school.

A few months later, he passed away. He was the first of our four grandparents to leave us. So clearly do I remember Nana Fretz getting out of Dad's car by the mailbox that day just as Nana Sherk came across the road. No words were spoken. They simply embraced in a loving way I had never seen them do before. In the service at the home preceding the church funeral, Pastor William Charlton spoke about "removing the ancient landmarks." The six oldest grandsons were his pallbearers.

Because we spent many a Sunday afternoon at Grandpa's, there were so many things we did that left lasting memories. The trip to the outhouse after a big dinner was special because it was a social time if cousins were also there.² The shop was an interesting place to play as was the hexagonal concession building he had purchased and moved from Erie Beach. It made an excellent brooder house. Going to the attic to see the spinning wheel was a rare occasion, but we often looked at slides with the stereoscope on Sunday afternoon visits.

The organ was fun to play but a more lasting sound was the hit-and-miss engine Grandpa cranked up on Monday mornings so Nana could do the laundry. The smells of Grandpa curing hams in the smokehouse and Nana making chili sauce in the summer kitchen are pleasant reminders of the enjoyable times we spent *up home*.

² Editor's note: In those days, Eaton's Catalogue had a practical use in the outhouse, and apparently the girl cousins would spend time there perusing the catalogue!

Nonconformity

What was your call?

While listening to the Bishop of the African Brethren In Christ Mission speak in 1958, my wife and I were attracted to his appeal for Ontario teachers to teach in the mission's teacher training institute in Southern Rhodesia. After a very brief interview, it was agreed that we would begin serving a two-year term on a voluntary basis beginning in January 1960.

At the annual denominational General Conference, we were summoned to appear before the Foreign Mission Board. After being incorrectly introduced, the chairman requested that I give my call. "Call" I surprisingly said, "I didn't have a call, I just thought a need represented a call." The board members sat quietly and finally the chairman said, "I guess the young man has a point."

Because we were paying our travel costs, rather than travel by ship as all missionaries did, it was more economical for us to teach until the Christmas break and fly to Africa so we could begin teaching by the middle of January. On arrival, some questioning missionaries



Extended Fretz family photo, likely taken just before Lester and Mary left for Africa in December 1959. Their daughter Sandi is not in the photo; she was born in 1960.

expressed surprise that we would fly as that just wasn't the general travel practice.

Saying the wrong thing

As was the custom, many missionaries welcomed our arrival at the airport. We were then whisked off to the bishop's residence for a reception where I became aware of mission protocol. Sitting next to the bishop for tea, I leaned over and said, "Arthur, where's the restroom?" In his curt, precise way he told me where it was. A well-seasoned missionary followed me down the hall and said politely, "We call him Bishop," to which I responded, "Oh, I call him Arthur." That was the beginning of two years of nonconformity.

Following that reception, we were driven through the bright tropical moonlight to our assignment at Mtshabezi Mission. Early the next morning as we walked to church, the matron of the mission alerted me to a problem. Up to this point of time, all voluntary workers were unmarried men who were assigned to sit in the front pew at church. Because I was married, she felt that I should sit with my wife where the married women sat in the rear bench behind the single missionary women.³

Missionaries are treated very specially on two occasions: their arrival and departure. Following that first church service, several missionaries gathered for a delicious noon meal. Hundreds of students smartly dressed in school attire marched to greet us singing a welcome song in native style.

Following the meal, the women cared for the usual post-dinner duties while the men gathered in the shade beneath a large tree. It soon became evident that they were discussing a very grave and serious matter. Finally, my curiosity got the best of me and I pushed myself into the circle to ascertain the problem.

They explained that a man-made lake was in jeopardy of drying up. A dry river bed ran from the base of the dam to the mission hospital

³ Eventually, I requested permission to sit with the African male teacher on the opposite side of the sanctuary on a bench with no back. Missionaries sat on comfortable benches with backs.

a half mile away. To fill the hospital cistern, it was necessary to open the gate at the bottom of the dam. Most of the water would be soaked up by the dry sand with only a miniscule amount reaching the cistern. The rainy season was nine months away and only enough water was left above the dam to do this one more time.

To conserve water and ensure that one hundred percent of the reserve would reach the cistern seemed like a very simple solution. "Why not go to Bulawayo (seventy miles away) and buy a half mile of plastic half inch pipe?" I helpfully suggested. Hands flew into the air accompanied by a burst of laughter. "Young man, you're in Africa now. This isn't America," they boomed. I slinked out of the circle.

Still very concerned about the dire problem, two weeks later I asked the doctor at the hospital how he was handling the water crisis. His head dropped and he muttered, "I went to Bulawayo and bought a half mile of plastic pipe."

Man or missionary?

Following that great reception, school began the next morning at 7:00 a.m. During an early breakfast, I was alerted to another problem. The teachers' college had three offices: one for the principal and two for the teaching staff. I was then given my choice of office: one was occupied by white missionary women and the second one was for African men. It only took a few seconds for me to make my selection. "I was a male before I became a missionary so I'll go with the African men," I was pleased to announce. Thus began both acceptance and alienation.

At 10:30 each morning the missionaries gathered for tea and a snack. It was very embarrassing to excuse myself from my African colleagues to attend the half-hour tea time. Eventually I suggested that these three African teachers be invited to join us but my request was flatly denied with the excuse, "They don't like our food."

As tea time came one hot morning, I said to my fellow African teachers, "Would you like to come to my house for a Coke?" With exuberance they accepted.

Segregation and integration

In the early 1960s nationalism was fomenting across the continent. When riots broke out in the Congo to the north, Africans in our country began talking about the need for independence. The Brethren In Christ had been in this part of Africa for sixty-five years. During that period, the missions grew and flourished.

Three Snakes

It seems that the prevalence of poisonous snakes is synonymous with Africa. When we accepted the two-year teaching assignment in Southern Rhodesia, the thought of encountering snakes never entered my mind. Once we arrived, different precautions were soon shared with us such as, "If a black mamba bites you, you'll die within thirty minutes if not given treatment. It can move fifteen feet per second."

The admonitions didn't cause me concern or prepare for an encounter with a snake. However, my reflexes soon kicked in one Sunday night when our mission staff was attending a vesper service at a nearby African village. (A village was comprised of several round mud huts with grass thatched roofs where an extended family lived.)

The African pastor stood with his back to the side of a hut. The group sat facing him on blocks of wood. At that time, there was racial unrest in the country fomented by riots in a neighbouring country. The pastor was speaking in the native language, which I didn't understand, and I wondered if the pastor said something upsetting when suddenly everyone jumped to their feet and began to run towards us.

Obviously everyone had spotted a long snake which had emerged from the wall of the hut, making a rapid wiggling movement toward us. I knew that if the snake were not killed, the occupants of the village could not remain there for the night. Beside the hut stood a short-handled shovel with a sharp point.

Fearlessly, I ran to the hut, grabbed the shovel and started making swipes at the snake. Because it kept getting away from me, each time I brought the shovel down, I merely shortened its fleeing body by a few inches. Finally, I was successful in chopping past the midpoint of the snake, the point where it becomes incapacitated. Africans

soon crushed its head, allowing the people to return to their seats for the conclusion of the service. Of course, the news of the white man killing a snake soon spread as the Africans had a very efficient communication system.

Because the country's annual rainfall was only about ten inches, when it rained, it came as a deluge. The government made grants available to build dams across streams. Dams not only provided water for crops and livestock, but they also reduced erosion. Daily social gatherings took place at a river where women walked to fill five-gallon containers of water and carry them back to their village. In some cases, this could be up to five miles.

One day the doctor of the local hospital and I decided to look for an additional dam site. Because there was the possibility of spotting wildlife we could shoot for meat, we each carried a high-powered rifle. Walking through shoulder high grass, the doctor suddenly stopped, freezing in his tracks. Suddenly his face lost colour. Standing erect directly in front of the doc and staring into his frightened face was a hooded cobra with its neck puffed as if to say, "You're my next victim."

Doctor Stern was normally a very daring individual, but this time he reflected no fearless valour. He was truly frightened—too frightened to move for fear the cobra would strike. Like a mamba, a cobra's bite caused death within thirty minutes.

I too was cautious about moving as the snake was only about fifteen or twenty feet away. In order to shoot the snake without the possibility of hitting the doctor, I had to move slowly and quietly so the snake would be directly in my firing range. Once in position, I raised my 303 Enfield, took a very careful bead on the snake's widened neck and pulled the trigger. It fell to the ground. Having lost interest in looking for a dam site, we returned to the mission compound.

When some Africans were informed of our harrowing experience, their immediate question was, "What did you do with the snake?" They were critical of us for leaving it lie, fearing that someone might step on it and be poisoned. Again, we had to admit our deficiency in knowing their culture.

The African communication is quick and comprehensive. Unfortunately these two encounters killing a snake gave me a reputation that I didn't welcome. It wasn't long until a third opportunity evolved to kill one. I desperately wanted to avoid this opportunity.

The mission complex on which we lived and worked had numerous dormitories for its several hundred boarding students. One day a couple of excited boarding students knocked at our door. They were insistent that I come immediately with them and bring my gun to kill a snake in their dorm. To turn down their request, I used different arguments: Probably it's gone by now. If you leave it alone, it will soon go away. Likely it's not a very big or poisonous snake.

The last argument caused one of the very hefty, mature girls to push up the sleeve on her blouse exposing the upper part of her arm saying, "It's as big as my arm!" Realizing the size of the snake made me less anxious to respond to their request.

They wouldn't leave without me accompanying them to their dorm where they pointed to the corner of the room where their clothes on hangers hung reaching to the floor. They claimed the snake lay hidden and curled there. Again, I tried to convince them that there was no snake in the corner. In one accord, they insisted that I shoot.

Because I couldn't see the snake and the floor was concrete, I feared two things: the shell might ricochet or I would be unsuccessful in making a killing shot, thus causing the snake to attack me. Increasingly I sensed the seriousness of the situation. Frightened, I lowered my gun and prayed for wisdom and courage. Putting the gun aside, I called for a long stick.

With the long stick, I gingerly reached in taking each item of clothing by its hanger and handing it to a receiving girl in the doorway. Occasionally, I would stop and suggest that the snake was probably gone. Their insistence forced me to continue removing more clothing. When the last dress was pulled from its hanger, the pile of mottled, coiled flesh in the corner revealed an immense snake. There was no way of estimating its length nor if it was poisonous. But most African snakes are poisonous.

Knowing that one shot could merely aggravate the snake into

attacking, I decided to use the stick as a killing tool, but doing that to strike the mass also had its limitations. What if when I swung the stick it struck the wall and didn't deliver a killing strike? To prevent this possibility, I then stepped to the opposite end of the room and practiced swinging the stick so I could accurately estimate where I should stand to attempt the assassination. Of course I prayed a second time. I really prayed!

Cautiously and carefully I then moved back to the corner where the coiled snake waited, probably to strike. Using the calculated distance, I swung the stick as quickly and hard as possible. To everyone's delight, it was a deadly blow.

When the dead reptile was pulled out of the dorm and stretched out on the soil, it turned out to be longer with a larger diameter than envisaged, giving us reason to thank God for his protection and help. To thank me for my effort and to acknowledge my snake killing prowess, it wasn't long until a local African brought a gift, a five-foot long black mamba. Placing the dead snake on a long bench, I used a razor blade to slit its underside from one end to the other. I then tacked the skin to a nearby tree to dry. Of course I was very careful with its venom.

Feedback from the community was not good. Attaching a snake skin to a tree where many people passed daily was a very inconsiderate thing to do. I was never able to learn the connotation of my unwelcomed act. Black mambas are extremely poisonous. They travel twelve miles per hour so it's difficult to outrun them!

When the skin was well-dried, I removed it, coiled it up, and brought it back to Canada where it gave credence to my snake stories. I have since given it to a nephew along with a very large python skin that has also part of my Rhodesian souvenirs.

Lessons Learned

Accept a gift graciously

The bell rang. Recess was over. Children and teachers began to head toward the school. Some ran while others sauntered. I was near

the far end of the playground when Carol joined me. She was one of ten or twelve children who lived in a well weathered house with few facilities. Her clothes were inferior to those of her classmates and it was obvious that personal cleanliness was very lacking.

As she walked along beside me, she opened her grubby hand and offered me a piece of candy she had been clutching. "Oh, no thank you" I said. I made an excuse: "I've been trying to lose weight so I shouldn't eat candy." She said nothing but darted off catching up with a woman teacher. Again, Carol extended opened her hand offering this compassionate lady her candy. Looking down at the little girl, the gracious teacher took the candy and put it into her mouth.

Side by side, the two walked together until they reached the school. In days to come, I often noticed that little girl walking with that teacher. Never did Carol ever saddle up beside me as she once did. I sensed her legitimate alienation.

But time was very kind to me. Years later I noticed an ad in the local newspaper inviting community people to an open house for Carol's parents' sixtieth anniversary to be held in a very modest hall in a local, small hamlet. Driving past that location late in the afternoon of the advertised event, I said to Mary, "I need to stop here."

Going into the noisy hall were the elderly parents and many descendants but no visitors. I was the only well-wisher. After congratulating the honored couple, I introduced myself and said that I had an apology to make. Word of the visitor quickly spread. A roar went up! The siblings, those former students, soon gathered excitedly around expectantly to hear my confession. It was a joy to say that after many years, I was sorry that I hadn't accepted Carol's candy. The hilarious laughter was their way of accepting my apology.

To my amazement and utter delight, a few days later a card arrived in the mail thanking me for attending the anniversary. Never before or since have I received such an acknowledgement!

Don't talk too much

In the summer of 1953, I began working as a shipper at a fruit wholesaler where we loaded several trucks daily for Dominion Stores

in Toronto. Due to the scarcity of trucks, it was my responsibility to get up during the night to load trucks.

After responding to these night time calls for a few years and learning of a truck for sale, I decided to buy it to be used solely for my employer. Thanks to my eighteen-year-old brother-in-law, his \$500 provided the down payment on this \$1,000 investment. He appeared to be satisfied, as this gave him the opportunity to become a truck driver and earn extra money.

The truck was always parked at the fruit warehouse. To be fair to other truckers, it was loaded only when no other truck was available. A full load of flat six-quart baskets of fruit was twelve hundred, for which we were paid five cents each to deliver to stores in Toronto. Drivers could be hired for \$10 a trip and the fuel cost \$6.

Competitors paid their drivers an hourly rate; thus, our truck often returned quicker enabling three round trips in a twenty-four hour period. To further expedite our service, grade eight boys were readily available to accompany and help the driver with unloading the fruit for the grand sum of \$2.

After profitably operating this trucking business for a few years, I was too glib in sharing information with a competitor who owned several trucks. The following spring, my employer informed me that he would no longer be using our truck as he had made a deal with the owner of the trucking firm with whom I had shared too much information.

Unfortunately, the trucker who absconded my business eventually went bankrupt and became a car salesman. Having no regrets or malice, when I needed to buy a pickup truck, I bought it from him. It was a good way to thank him for the lesson he taught me.

Don't take "no" for an answer

Having to attend summer school in Toronto when I only earned a total salary of \$2,000 over the previous ten months of teaching, I needed to find part-time employment for July and August. Fortunately, there were no afternoon courses.

Living near The Danforth, I struck out one day with the intention of looking for employment in a supermarket. Before reaching a grocery store, I noticed a sign in a window—“Salesman Wanted.” Approaching the manager of this Agnew Surpass store, I told him I was interested in the job advertised in his window. His first question was, “Have you sold shoes before?”

When I told him no, he then asked why I even came in when the sign requested an experienced shoe salesman. He promptly marched me to look at the sign at the front of the store. His speech and manner showed that he wanted to prove that I should not have applied for the job.

As he pondered the sign which did not include “experienced,” I said, “I’ve sold advertising (as the ad manager for a yearbook), and if anyone can sell advertising, he can easily sell shoes!”

“Young man,” he said, “I guess you’ve proved your point. You’re hired.”

In two weeks, I was the top of three salesmen. The manager soon started having me do the daily banking, something he explained was usually only done by the manager or assistant manager. When summer school ended, with returning-to-school customers, I obliged the manager by staying on to boost sales while enjoying my job and the much-needed pay!

I’m unsure from whom I learned an excellent technique to get a sale. It was a valued lesson that contributed to the growth of my sales.

The majority of the customers were women. Sometimes they said when they came in, “I’m only here to look.” Getting them seated and asking them what type of shoe they would like to try on was the first step. Soon several pairs of shoes would pile up around them. Someone gave me a tip to always remove a pair of shoes that the customer obviously wasn’t attracted to from the pile leaving only three pairs.

Eventually, I would ask the shopper which pair she liked less. I would then remove it and listen to her discuss the remaining two pairs. My last two questions were, “Which pair do you like the best?” and “May I wrap it up for you?”

Be proactive

Conveniently located in my daily plan book, I kept a list of questions to ask the inspector at the time of his visit to evaluate my teaching performance. This consumed his evaluation time, so rather than being critical of my work, he spent the time answering my questions. He always seemed impressed with the quality and relevance of my questions which made him feel good and fulfilled in his role.

While an inspector was observing the lesson I was teaching, at an appropriate time I would turn to him and ask a question that invited a lengthy explanation. He loved having the floor and opportunity to share his wealth of knowledge with the pupils. Finally, the automatic bell would ring signaling the end of the period and his inspection of my performance which he always rated very high.

Find a need and meet it

Providing goods and services is the basis of our capitalistic society. It not only makes the recipient of the good or service happy, but it also puts a profit in one's pocket.

When I attended high school, there were no cafeteria or dispensing machines in our school which was located about 500 feet from a small convenience store. As the guys would gathered to eat their lunch, I said, "Does anyone want a pop?" whereupon I took orders for their soft drinks and they would shell out a dime.

Running to this local store, I filled my order and deliver it to the waiting fellows. When lunch was finished, I returned the empties for which I received the three cent deposit included in the ten cent purchase. The guys appreciated the service and I was glad to make a few cents. Over a two year period, those deposits helped my bank account grow. Of course the store owner was always glad for my business. Sometimes I bought a pork chop and a slice of bread providing she would fry it.

Following my retirement [as director of stewardship for the Brethren in Christ Church], various individuals whom I had served requested that I continue to assist by investing their savings. Trust companies soon learned that I had clients for whom I could direct

their investing and began to offer me a commission.

By bringing a combined investment of \$100,000 or more, I could negotiate a better yield for the two or three investors than they could have obtained. Providing this service was a win-win situation for the investor as well as myself. On my best day, the commission amounted to \$2,000.

Learn how it feels

Johnnie was an immigrant who was slightly mentally challenged. He had worked for a local farmer and earned enough money to construct a crude house on the farmer's land. In time it burned, probably a result of arson.

Johnnie was sincere as was evident in his attendance at a local church where he endeavoured to share his faith whenever there was an opportunity for individuals to speak. Often, the pastor struggled to bring his testimony to an end. One of Johnnie's strongest desires was to find a mate for life.

After working several years for a local farmer, in his senior years Johnnie ended up living in a rooming house in a poor area of St. Catherines. Seven days a week he walked the surrounding highways picking up bottles that he redeemed for cash. Because of the regularity of his seven routine routes, he was soon known by many as the "Bottle Man." One month "Johnnie, The Bottle Man" was the feature article in the *Niagara Monthly*.

One day exactly one month before Christmas in 1982, driving along the Queen Elizabeth Highway, I spotted the bottle man. An old burlap bag slung over his shoulder assured me it was Johnnie. Since it was near lunch time, I pulled over on the shoulder of the road, called him to my car. After a short conversation, I handed him a two-dollar bill suggesting that he go to a nearby McDonald's and have something to eat.

Initially I felt good about my act but as I drove away, I regretted that I didn't invite him to be my guest for lunch. So, I stopped until he reached the car the second time. I asked that he give me the two dollars and get in with me so we could go to a restaurant. Nearby was a well-

known restaurant noted for its barbecued chicken. I asked Johnnie if he had ever eaten at Swiss Chalet. “No” came a very slow innocent response indicating that he was unaware of such a restaurant.

I in my blue three-piece business suit and Johnnie in his very tattered clothes entered the restaurant, stopping at the coat check. Although my guest wore two tattered sweaters with ragged cuffs, his elbows protruded through the threadbare sleeves. The rest of his clothing was equally very old, worn and dirty. No maitre d’ offered us a table. We just stood there. I felt demeaned. Wondering what to do, I led the way to a table at the rear of the restaurant so we would be as unobtrusive as possible.

We waited for service. None was offered—not even coffee or a menu. Eventually, I managed to attract the attention of a waitress and imploringly said, “Will you please bring us two chicken dinners?” No friendly chit chat came from the waitress as she plunked the plates in front of us. I was probably sensing the utter rejection more than Johnnie. It was a new experience for me. I felt the staring, glaring eyes of the other guests. Never was I treated so despicably.

Appearing ravenous, with both hands Johnnie tore the well-roasted chicken from the bones and stuffed the shredded meat into his toothless mouth. The French fries disappeared just as quickly while he stopped occasionally to lick his fingers; naturally, he couldn’t see the food on his face. We lingered and visited about former days and his current working and living conditions.

The waitress never returned to our table to offer us drink refills or asked if we wanted to order dessert. Retrieving my jacket from beside his sweater and leaving the restaurant was somewhat embarrassing. On the other hand, I was glad that I had done it as I was beginning to regain my composure and sense of self-worth.

As I dropped Johnnie off along the highway to resume his day’s work, over the Christian radio station came the song “Come On, Ring Those Bells,” as it was just a few days before Christmas. Merging into traffic, it dawned on me that I had just been privileged to have rung one bell!

Go the second mile

Making hay was one of the major summer tasks for our large herd of Holsteins. In order to have sufficient hay for the winter months, we sometimes cut and baled hay for other farmers on a shared basis.

I'll never forget the time my dad sent me to a farm a few miles away and told me to make the hay in a certain field. It was the worst field of hay I had ever seen! Weeds made up much of the crop. The hay was so short and scant that the bales were sparsely spaced across the field. I soon realized that we had made a poor deal with the farmer.

I took my two younger brothers to the field to pick up our hand and, knowing how many bales were in the field, I calculated our share. Then I decided that rather than leaving every third bale for the owner, it would save him a lot of driving if we simply took our share of the hay from one side of the field and left the other side for him. I was trying to be kind to him—or so I thought for a couple of months.

Sometime later, as we were driving up the road in our pickup, we were flagged down by this farmer in his red, rusty, and rattly pickup. He was most irate. He had just gone to the field to get his well weathered hay, now late in the fall.

And he was angry! The farmer's face was nearly as red as his truck. In a mean voice he yelled at my father, "Howard, I thought I could trust you, but your boys have cheated me. They took all of the good hay, and left me with the poor hay."

My dad was apologetic. He spoke gently to the farmer and tried to quiet him down. When I attempted to interrupt to explain, Dad simply put his hand on my leg, implying that I should keep quiet. In a non-argumentative manner, he assured the farmer, "We'll make it right."

Turning around and going back to our barn, Dad said, "Take him a load of the alfalfa." "The alfalfa!" I exclaimed, "why that's our best hay!" "Yes," insisted Dad, "give him the alfalfa." So we took the farmer the alfalfa hay. We didn't unload it in his field. Instead, we took it to his barn and put it up into the hayloft.

Dad's lesson has followed me through life.

*Leave a living legacy*⁴

When my father died over three decades ago, we simply took his licence plate to the funeral home where it was displayed reflecting his and my mother's special long-term interests and commitments. It read: "4 MCC." When an organization connected with one of my brothers realized a donation would become an endowment, they gave a \$500 donation. They never would have spent that amount on flowers!

During World War II, my parents helped to preserve food for MCC. In retirement, they were involved in an MCC program providing food for Canada's indigenous people. Their interest in and support of world relief greatly influenced their eight children's values.

Statistics clearly underscore that giving to charitable organizations, including churches, is declining. When Joseph realized the effects of an imminent seven-year draught, he planned for the future by warehousing grain. This model can be replicated today to ensure future funding for Christian ministries by creating endowment plans to receive donations that will become a fund in perpetuity, providing an ongoing cash flow to its named beneficiaries.

Flowers are fragrant but fleeting. A few flowers are very comforting; however, it is unfortunate when an abundance of flowers are given to console the bereaved or in memory of a loved one, causing the family difficulty disposing of them in addition to the emotional effect of this necessity.

A more permanent memorial can be established by donating to an endowment in memory of the deceased. Because of the tax advantage by donating to a registered charity, the amount of the donation can even be enhanced. There is data indicating that the most elderly generation in the US has \$14 trillion. In Canada, it's proportionate. In some cases, these people are concerned about the ill effects of passing all of this wealth to their children or grandchildren.

Often this elderly generation has favourite ministries to which

⁴ Originally published in *Shalom! A Journal for the Practice of Reconciliation*, Fall 2019, 12.

they have ties and interests. By making an endowment gift to these favoured ministries either while living or as a bequest, the donor is effectively providing for ongoing support from the annual revenue of the gift. The endowment also strengthens the ministry's equity position.

Having the privilege and responsibility to designate the endowment's annual disbursement by successive generations will most decidedly have a positive effect on their value system. When our family endowment was originated, the grandchildren were not at an income earning stage. My parents' legacy is now reflected as successive generations have been making donations to our family endowment.

There are many more values than giving money that parents can pass on to their families. Two children served as missionaries in Brazil and Zambia. My parents' interest in MCC influenced two of their sons as well as two grandsons to serve with MCC. These cross-cultural opportunities engendered positive attitudes toward other races, impoverished people, volunteerism and serving the Lord. Over the years, our family endowment has grown both in principal and



This license plate was on Lester's father's car. When he died, Lester removed the license and used it at his father's funeral, where memorial gifts went to Mennonite Central Committee (MCC).



Mary and Lester in their later years.

its annual revenue to MCC, feeding many hungry people around the world through our family's lasting, living legacy.

It's disappointing when donations are made to a church to purchase something in memory of a loved one that eventually becomes obsolete. On the other hand, making a donation to an "in memory" endowment provides an ongoing and permanent way of remembering the loved one while blessing a favoured ministry each year.

How does one show respect and appreciation for a couple's seventy-fifth wedding anniversary or someone's ninetieth birthday? Here again, a gift to a Christian charity's endowment "in honour" of such individuals is a more lasting recognition than another piece of china for their already crowded curio cabinet! Providing sufficient funds to erect a building or some other useful capital project as a memorial certainly has merit. Such memorial gifts should also be sufficient to care for ongoing maintenance.

The difference between tangible memorials and a living legacy has

a biblical basis. Not only did Joseph in Egypt give a model, Jesus also gave a mandate when he said, “Lay not up treasures on earth where moth and rust corrupt, but lay up treasures in heaven.” Donating to a Christian charity’s endowment demonstrates laying up treasures in heaven.

Because “you can’t take it with you,” giving to an endowment is a lasting way of sending it on ahead. Giving to the Lord’s work is indeed important. Living a committed and dedicated life to the Lord is a much greater testimony and legacy to leave.