

THE STORE'S STORY -- PART 3

The Gommels and group of Believers had just purchased and outfitted the Hitchin Post Market, never having operated a store or done anything like it ever. All they had was their native talent, their training in areas totally different, and their faith in God and following His lead wherever it took them.

Having transformed the Hitchin Post from an ugly little box to a warm and welcoming one-stop store, naturally sales began to grow. Money was tight for the first couple of years, and often they were unsure if they would be able to pay the bills. But they worked hard and kept at it, learning the grocery business and forging strong friendships with the residents of Reche Canyon Mobile Estates, many of whom walked to the little store for their daily recreation.

Their first day of operation was July 7, 1967, for which I was present, since school was out for the summer. It was a lot of fun to work at that little store, especially since Gommel did the harder stuff like the bookkeeping. Others of us got to wait on customers, make ice cream treats in the Snack Shop, check in deliveries, and other fun stuff. At the time there were fewer intrusions of the various levels of government, fewer permits, and fewer inspectors. Why couldn't they have left things alone like that?

In the fall of 1967, I returned to college, leaving the others to run the store except when I'd come home for holidays and vacation. At Westmont College, during the third year, I became aware of a guy named Bill Lembright, but since he was 2 years behind me and much more "religious" or "holy" than I, we didn't cross paths very much, somewhat intentionally on both of our parts.

But again, God had different ideas than either of us did. He had sent Bill to Westmont, kicking and screaming, pulling him out of his chosen career path that was to begin at UC Riverside. He sent me to Westmont wondering what the heck I was doing at a place with a bunch of religious rules. And then He sent both of us, along with one other fellow student, to Reche Canyon in the spring of 1970, where

against both of our wills, but for different reasons, God made it clear that we were to be a part of that group and that mission of service. (Unlike Bill, I didn't have a chosen career path. I just didn't want to be around my parents that much. But I didn't want to buck God more than I didn't want to be with my folks, so to Reche Canyon I went.)

Because the Hitchin Post had grown and was still growing, the



Leo's Market

extra hands were welcome. Several of Bill's friends from the Bay Area also responded to God's call and came to Reche Canyon, one of whom was Janet Todd, later to become Jan Lembright. Our little work force grew from 3 or 4 to about 8.

The extra bodies allowed the store to embark on new ventures: auto repair, tires, and serious supply of hay and feed. All of the services and products together made for meaningful, unreligious and "un-holy" service to people, which seemed to be the point God was trying to make to us. "I don't want you playing church or religious games. I want you to serve people in My name!"

By 1974, our little group had grown to about 15 people, some of whom had jobs elsewhere, but most of whom worked at the Hitchin Post. Now we had more people than the store could support, so we had to figure out what God wanted each of us to do. And

then we became restless because the smog was getting worse and the cities were growing too close. Reche Canyon was gradually changing – modernizing and urbanizing. (O goody!) So we began to ask, what should we do to use our people most productively? Should we remain here in Smogville?

Why were we restless, and what motivated us?

The Gospel of John tells the story

(which is beautifully portrayed in the video series "The Chosen") of how Nicodemus the Pharisee came to Jesus at night for fear of looking bad to fellow Pharisees. Jesus, trying to get across to him the idea of the Holy Spirit (vs. "THE LAW!", religion, or churchianity), said to Nicodemus, "The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit." And that's how it seemed – we felt the breeze of the Holy



"Sand Van
Auto Repair
Tool Box"

Spirit rustling the leaves around us, letting us know of His presence, and that God had something for us. None of us understood exactly, but there this restlessness was rooted

in the Spirit, causing us to ask God what He was trying to say, and then to start looking around for answers.

My folks would spend their days off – one day a week, as a sabbath day -- at a little trailer that they kept parked at Lighthouse Lodge near Fawnskin at Big Bear Lake. They would go up there the night before, and return the next evening. On the return trip they often took the back way, down Highway 18, through Lucerne Valley and Victorville, then down Cajon Pass (a four-lane divided highway at the time), and across the valley to Reche Canyon.

(Gommel loved the desert from his days as a kid at Newberry, and he and his dad Pappy tried driving to the Grand Canyon once, over the mountains, through Lucerne Valley, down Cain Springs road to Newberry, and east to Grand Canyon. They ran out of money at Williams and had to return without seeing the Grand Canyon!)

Was God bugging us about this little desert town? Was there something He had in mind for us to do there? The Hitchin Post was our template of what we expected God would want, and we started looking around for a place to do a second Hitchin Post. In Lucerne Valley there were two stores – a big grocery store called Leo's Market and a much smaller store called West End Market run by a nice elderly lady whose name was Bess Cowan. Her store was located on the – wait for it! – west end of town. It had the most potential to become our second Hitchin Post, and so we naturally were drawn to it.

One day Bill and Jan, the Gommels, and a few others came out to Lucerne Valley to look at it together. (I stayed at the Hitchin Post to mind that store.) The group that came out here looked at the store, and then sat on the curb there to think about it, to ask God what He had in mind, and to imagine what it could be.

Bill Lembright remembers thinking that it had potential as a little western town with false fronted buildings and an assortment of small businesses located there. We might have gasoline, hay and feed, and the variety of merchandise similar to what was in the Hitchin Post. But then they fussed about hurting the other gas stations and

feed stores if we were to do that.

Besides, something just didn't seem right about it. Our minds and spirits were not settled. What was it that was bothering us? The opportunity to develop West End Market seemed to suit our experience, our capabilities, and our personalities just perfectly.

To be continued . . .

Linda Gommel

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