

Wet Behind the Ears

“Bring them in, bring them in, bring the wandering ones...” Abe stopped singing as with a surge of satisfaction he saw the river just a mile this side of his destination. “That will be the perfect place for the baptisms,” he thought, looking down at the water as he crossed the steel bridge.

Nobody noticed the dusty 12-year-old Ford as Abe drove into the town of Horseshoe on this hot July day in 1949. However, Rev. Abraham Forrester, as he preferred to be known, looked around in approval at the bustling town. Horseshoe was the largest trading center for a radius of over a hundred miles, serving farmers, oilmen, ranchers and all the merchants and tradespeople who supported them. “The fields are ripe for a harvest for the Lord, just as the scripture says,” he thought.

Fresh from his training at the Evangelical Bible Institute in Chicago, and secure in the confidence of his 21 years, Abe was certain God had sent him here as the perfect place to begin a world-famous career as a traveling evangelist. He had placed first in his Bible studies classes at school and his instructors had unanimously agreed that he was an exceptionally gifted preacher.

Visions danced in his head of hundreds, then thousands of people coming forward during the altar calls at future revivals in which he would speak forcefully and eloquently. He would lead more converts to the lord than even his idol, the great revivalist Billy Sunday. He would preach to packed crowds in huge coliseums in every large city in the nation...the world! And it would all begin here in Horseshoe, Oklahoma. Now.

An impatient car horn shattered his reverie. Called back to the present, he found a place to park on the town square and went in search of a hall to hire for his proposed first five days of revival services. "This is it, the beginning," he thought. He booked the Convention Center and then set about finding an affordable boarding house.

During the following two weeks Abe met with numerous local ministers, placed an ad in the only town newspaper and strung a large banner across the outside of the Convention Center to announce his fledgling "River of Life" revival meetings of which he was the sole staff member.

He was invited to speak at a couple of churches and felt he had done well. The young ladies looked at him with worshipful eyes and even if some of the older farmers had shown some skepticism, he knew they would be impressed by his knowledge.

The first night of the revival, dressed in his threadbare three-piece suit, he waited for the choir composed of singers from several local churches to finish leading the final hymn. "When peace like a river attendeth my way, when sorrows like sea billows roll..." they sang.

He stepped onto the stage in front of his audience of women in cotton dresses, and men in overalls or jeans to begin his sermon. "You may spend your life pulling and tugging at the pricks and troubles of this world, but I offer you a river to carry you through all your afflictions. It is the living water of the word of God!" he thundered to the crowd. "Amen!" and "Preach it, Brother!" punctuated his words. The service ended with three people answering the altar call and a generous \$23 in the offering plate.

It was a promising start and by the end of the week he had nine new converts. He scheduled a baptism in the river he had crossed as he drove into town. The baptism would

be the high point of the revival and he was ecstatic; he had taken his first step to evangelistic immortality!

The locals just called the river the Salt Fork, even though on the map it was the Salt Fork of the Arkansas. It wandered through a wide flat of clean white sand punctuated by thickets of red and green tamarack. The river was called the Salt Fork because it ran through the Great Salt Plains where buffalo and other animals used to come to lick the salty ground. Abe didn't know that a few years earlier, the river had been dammed to control flooding downstream. This meant the dam was opened occasionally as the winter rains brought the water up in the reservoir, but in the dry summer, very little water was allowed to trickle through.

To get to the baptism site he crept his car down a road composed of two dusty tire tracks with grass in the middle. The little-used track had been put in by the county as river access and came down the hill like a small roller coaster – it was maintained by a local volunteer who put humps in it to keep it from washing out in a gully washer. At the bottom of the hill, the road took a sharp left, passed a couple of huge cottonwood trees and followed the riverbank, then it went up another hill to make a circle drive in front of a house.

Abe was thrilled to see cars lining the road at the top of the hill and along the edge of the river bank as he arrived for the baptism service. He wasn't quite as happy to see the rowdier element of town which had also shown up clutching their six packs and long-necked bottles of Jax beer. But, he had a large turnout overall to see the triumph of his first river baptism and the culmination of his revival.

As the choir on the bank sang "Shall we gather at the river, the beautiful, the beautiful river..." he pulled on his rubber waders, purchased new for this event, and holding his

Bible, walked across the sand and out into the water, his little flock of converts following him like ducklings.

At first he was undismayed by the shallow water that came barely past his ankles. But he crossed the 30 feet to the other bank and it never got deeper than his lower calves. Beginning to be concerned he moved up and down and back and forth across the stream, trying to find a spot deep enough for a full immersion baptism - the only kind he believed in.

There were no deeper spots.

To make matters even worse, the crowd on the bank began to titter, and the rowdier element began to loudly guffaw and catcall.

“What’s the matter, Preacher, our river ain’t good enough for ya?”

“Can’t find the right place, Preacher?”

“Look-it that, he’s wanderin’ around just like Moses in the Red Sea.”

Abe was embarrassed by the laughter and jeers and began to panic. He had never faced a situation like this. He had nothing to use to pour the baptismal waters on the heads of his converts and to his mind that wasn’t a *real* baptism anyway. He certainly wasn’t going to sprinkle!

Then, he noticed one of the children from the crowd sit down in the water and begin to roll around on the sandy bottom of the river, getting soaking wet in the process. The Bible verse “and a little child shall lead them...” came to him in a burst of terrified inspiration.

“Lay down in the water,” he hurriedly instructed his group flapping his hands, “and roll all the way over three times until you’re completely wet.” Most of the group looked at him in disbelief and a few shook their heads and began to wade back to shore.

But some followed his orders and lay down in the water and began to roll. Abe began the words of the baptism service he had prepared. “Hear the words of our Lord: All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me...All of us who were baptized were baptized into death. Therefore just as he was raised from the dead, we baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit-in-order-that-you-may-rise-to-walk-in-the-newness-of-life.” As he recited the words he began to speak faster and faster until the last few words ran together almost as one and he finished with a gasp.

By the time he finished the crowd was roaring with laughter. “I’ve heard of Holy Rollers,” one wag yelled, “but that’s the first time I ever saw any!” The crowd howled. Some adolescents and children and even a few adults jumped into the river and began splashing each other. “I’m baptized, I’m baptized!” one child shrieked.

Abe was mortified. He completely forgot about the sermon he had prepared. No one had ever laughed at him like this before. He just wanted to get away from the rambunctious crowd. Refusing to look at anyone, red-faced and embarrassed, Abe came out of the water and sloshed back to his car. He took off his waders and drove back into town where he got his belongings from the boarding house before he left the scene of the biggest humiliation of his life.

As he crossed the bridge leaving town, he refused to even look down at his river of sorrows.

“No more river baptisms!” he muttered as he drove away.



Name of Writer: Karen Heaster

Category: Fiction

Facility: Twin Towers

Title of Entry: Wet Behind the Ears