

## ESCAPE FROM THE “LIONS’ DEN”

By Paul M. Riley MD:FACS

Twenty three year old John Riley slowly became aware of his surroundings. He had been hallucinating. He thought he had died and gone to hell. He had a splitting headache! His body felt like it was on fire. Demons were attacking him from all sides. They had chased him, caught him, and knocked him down. Now, several of them were holding him down on the floor. One was sitting on his chest choking him with both hands. He then realized he was lying on a cold concrete floor. He was surrounded by men in striped clothes. Then he became aware that he also was wearing dirty, tattered, striped clothing. He had bruises all over his body; he was very thin; and every bone in his body hurt.

John somehow freed his neck and screamed for help. He was relieved to see several large uniformed guards, armed with batons, rushing into the room; help had come at last; so he thought! His attackers immediately released John, retreated a few steps, and then formed a large circle around John and the guards, anticipating with glee what was about to happen. John stood up, ready to escape from his attackers. Instead of rescuing him, the guards viciously attacked John. He was beaten with batons, knocked down and kicked in the sides. “You scream again and we will kill you,” John was told. As soon as the guards left, John was again attacked by the abusive inmates. The pain was so terrible that John had to scream! The angry guards rushed in again. John stood up, again trying to escape! “Now we are going to kill you,” John was told. The blows to his head caused John to see stars. He fell to the ground. He felt his ribs snap as he was being kicked. He lay motionless curled up in a ball. He started coughing up frothy bloody fluid; the broken end of a rib had punctured his lung! “Look at that,” one of the guards remarked as they left. “Let’s get out of here; he won’t last very long!”

John did not recall how he got locked up in that hellhole. He began to remember his past. He had been raised on a homestead in Eastern Colorado. His father, George Henry Riley, had died, unexpectedly, in 1921, from meningitis, after having surgery for mastoiditis. Fifteen year old John, being the oldest child, had to quit high school and make a living for his mother and six children. Due to past debts the homestead was auctioned off. The hardest thing for John to lose was his beautiful horse “Monte”, the love of his life. John watched it being led away. It kept looking back over its shoulder calling for John. For the first time John could not help! The family had to go live with various relatives. In order to support his family, John started to work as a cowboy. He also learned to fix cars, working, when he was off duty at the Ranch, in a garage owned by Everett Ashcraft, who had married John’s cousin, Malissa Riley. He became more and more concerned about his future. He felt the need to complete his education and help others. He also became very concerned about all the destructive temptations around him and the burden of sin that he was carrying. He began to attend a local church; but that was worse. The church taught that it was impossible to be rid of the burden of sin. In fact, he was taught he must sin in word, thought, and deed every day to keep God’s favor. John felt worse than ever!

John started playing on the local baseball team on Sundays, one of the few excitements in town. On payday weekends, people living in town were often kept awake Friday and

Saturday nights by cars cruising Main Street. Drunk Cowboys would let off steam by roaring through town in their Stutz-Bearcat roadsters. The mufflers had been removed and straight exhaust pipes had been installed! All the windows in town would rattle. The streets would be lit up by the flames roaring out from the exhausts! Sometimes there would be an impromptu whip cracking contest. This was done in a corrugated iron shed with an open front. The noise was louder than any gun-fire! Once the Sheriff tried to stop the noise, but retreated when the cowboys turned on him and expertly shredded his uniform with their whips; yet did not leave even a mark on his skin!

When two brothers, Wesley and Herman Cusick, the best baseball players on the team, “got religion” and quit the team, John became curious when he realized that they had what he wanted. The next Saturday night he attended a Revival at Eagle Bluff Free Methodist Church. Rev. S.K. Wheatlake told how one could be relieved of the burden of sin. John went forward at the end of the service. He confessed his sins and turned his life over to God. The burden of sin was lifted. He had never been so happy. He wanted to learn more about God. He felt called to preach. He was given a Bible and found a tattered song book. He had to ride long hours around the range checking on several hundred cattle, repairing fences, rounding up strays, and bringing in newborn calves that were not thriving. He was riding Diablo, a very mean, unpredictable, horse. John would read his Bible and sing songs to his horse. He noticed that the horse was very docile while he was singing or reading out loud. Years later, John learned he was tone deaf and had sung all the songs in the hymn book to the same tune! John felt called to preach, but could not continue his education as long as he had to support his family. Still he practiced preaching to his horse as he rode the range. Meanwhile he made lifelong friends among his church leaders. John thought that the church leaders would try to dictate to him and control him and lecture him about his shortcomings. But the only advice he got was to study his Bible and pray for God to guide him. These People were very strict in their own personal lives, but did not criticize John when he made mistakes. John felt so free in their presence; he felt their approval and support. He began to trust God to open the way for him to go to Bible School.

John’s situation finally changed. His mother remarried; her husband, John Turner, was able to support the family. Then in 1924 John’s rancher boss was riding in the caboose of a train taking his cattle to the stockyards in Kansas City. He had to feed and water the cattle at certain train stops. He and two other ranchers were drinking and gambling. It was election time. John’s boss was so sure that John W. Davis would become president that he bet his whole trainload of cattle. When the train reached Kansas City, he found his candidate had lost. John’s boss ended up losing his ranch and John lost his job.

John was then accepted at God’s Bible School (GBS) in Cincinnati, Ohio. He would start in the fall of 1925. He was able to work in Everett’s garage until he left for GBS. There he would have to work full time and go to school part time. The church took a collection to pay John’s bus fare to Cincinnati. The first two years John was foreman of the school’s garage. Then, later, he resigned that job because he was ordered to dispense free gasoline for non-school vehicles and personnel. That was against School Policy! He was then put in charge of the school kitchen. Many of the Evangelists and Spirit filled Church Leaders,

at that time, came and taught or held revivals at GBS. John enjoyed preparing special meals and serving these guests meals and snacks in their room. He learned as much from these Saints as he learned in his classes! They were so polite and appreciative and showed such love for everybody! He got to know them personally! "Uncle Bud" Robinson was his favorite! Some of them even ended up supporting John when he later became a missionary. John also enjoyed planning Thanksgiving dinner for over a hundred underprivileged families. This was a tradition for many years at G.B.S. Buses were provided to transport poor people from all over the city and surrounding areas. John recalled on one occasion, after the food was served, a visiting Bishop took a long time to say the blessing. Before he finished, several hungry children had cleaned their plates and were screaming for refills!

John was very impressed with Betty, one of his fellow workers. Like John, she was working full time. Betty was very beautiful and very smart. She could sing, preach, and play several musical instruments. Betty and John worked as a team. They stayed and helped each other until all the work was done! Since John was more mature than most of the students, Betty came to him with her problems. One day John noticed that Betty was no longer her happy self. She appeared very confused. Finally she spoke to John. "So far this week I have had five preacher boys tell me that the Lord had told them that I am to be their wife. All of them were upset when I told them that I would have to pray about it! All five of these boys are pompous, self centered guys; I would be miserable if I married any one of them." "That's easy," John replied. "Just ask them why the Lord has not told you about it." John and Betty became closer after both injured their hands. John lost the end of his left middle finger in a meat grinder. Then the end of Betty's finger was cut off in a meat slicer. Each of them felt responsible for the other's injury.

In January 1928 John was told that he would have to leave at the end of that semester because of his school debt. Working full time for the school was not enough! Meanwhile John had met Rev. Morris, head of a Mission in Southern Texas. He was a bachelor. The Missionaries there worked among Mexican farm workers; some also worked in the city slums reaching derelicts and prostitutes. They rescued drunks from off the street, sobered them up, fed them, and tried to save them, with some success. Since John could speak Spanish, loved Mexican food and culture, loved horses, could preach, could cook, and was a self taught motor mechanic, he felt that he could be of service. He would also be ministering to the "baqueros", Mexican cowboys working on a huge local ranch; he had always admired their horsemanship! They were the original "buckaroos"! He would be able to take two Bible School courses by correspondence and he would get credit for his missionary service. When Rev. Morris called John and told him that the Lord had told him that John was to serve in the Texas Mission, John did not question the decision. Rev. Morris also said that the Mission would supply room and board and pay off some of John's school debts. John was also sent a bus ticket.

At first John was thrilled to be working in Texas. The Mexican farm workers' families lived in small houses perched up on wooden pillars. Often chickens and goats lived under the houses. Meals were cooked outside in pots hung over a fire. These people received John with open arms. The Mexican children ran out and grabbed John's hands. They tried

out their English on John, who in turn learned more Spanish from them. They invited him into their homes and were eager to share their food with him. They listened intently to the message of Salvation that John preached. John was puzzled when he saw that the Mexican people avoided Rev. Morris. They would run into their houses and lock the door when they saw Rev. Morris approaching. They kept telling John to be careful; Rev. Morris was a bad Gringo! John also noticed that the people avoided one of the Catholic priests; also calling him a bad Gringo! John's work included driving some ladies to hold meetings on Skid Row and making sure they remained safe. He also taught Sunday school and sometimes preached at a local church. But, the more the Church Members showed love and appreciation for John, the worse John was treated by Rev. Morris!

John eventually realized that Rev. Morris wanted to control every aspect of his life, even his mind. He would give instructions which John followed to the letter; then he would deny giving the instruction and accuse John of insubordination. He would make statements, then deny he made the statements and call John a liar when he repeated Rev. Morris word for word. He told John that he, Rev. Morris, alone, was the voice of God; no one could question him. He criticized everything that John did or said. He then began to blame John for all his problems, even those problems he experienced long before he ever met John. He said he was unpopular with the Mexicans because John was telling them lies about him. He insisted that John have no privacy. Rev Morris had to read all of John's mail, even what he wrote for his GBS courses. John had to get permission to contact his friends or family. John was not permitted to lock his bedroom door! Rev. Morris would barge into John's room at any time, day or night, because he was sure John was doing something wrong! He would even accompany John to the outhouse (toilet) so he could critique those functions!

At first, John believed Rev. Morris. After all, he said he was the voice of God. He would browbeat and control John with scripture, taken out of context, to justify this behavior! Previously, John had almost worshipped the church leaders who had given him such encouragement. Now that he was being told he was all bad, he felt he must try harder to please the Lord. He was told to do the most menial tasks; he did these without complaining!

One day Rev. Morris addressed him, "The Lord told me that you must get married. He wants you to continue visiting Mexican families, the women are often alone during the day; they should never open their doors to a single man! Also, some of the women who you take to skid row are single! They can't ride alone with you unless your wife is with you!

John immediately thought of Betty. He had kept in contact with her but had avoided becoming romantic. He had been determined to finish school before looking for a wife. Betty was working so she could get enough money to return to school. She was becoming discouraged. John wrote to her and explained his situation. To his surprise, Betty accepted John's proposal. A wedding was planned. John thought that once he was married the abuse would end! Betty was excited and looked forward to working among the Mexicans. A few days before the wedding, Rev. Morris came rushing into the room saying; "The Lord has changed His mind. Some of the drunks we care for can become

violent! God wants you to work with the single men, they are far from home, and live in large dormitories; it would be too dangerous for your wife. You must cancel your wedding. Also, you are not making enough money to support a wife.”

John was already having second thoughts about the marriage. When he called Betty he was pleased that she felt the same way. They both were relieved since there was no real chemistry between them; they were too much like brother and sister! Both were very happy and relieved to be able to cancel their wedding plans. John then informed Rev. Morris that wedding plans had been cancelled. However, instead of John pleasing him, Rev. Morris became even more abusive and harassed John around the clock, even keeping John awake at night with lectures and accusations!

At the Annual Assembly of his Church District, Rev. Morris was scheduled to give a report on the Mission. Instead of reporting his converts, and the activities of his workers, he spent the entire time lashing out against John Riley, publicly accusing him of lying and undermining the work. Worst of all, he told the whole Assembly, John was a liar and a cheat; he had asked a lovely Christian girl to marry him; then had deliberately cancelled the wedding and broke her heart. The poor girl would never recover from this insult and was on the verge of suicide! No one could convince Rev. Morris that this behavior was abnormal!

John realized he was back in bondage; almost as bad as the bondage of sin. He had to keep looking over his shoulder and crept around trying to avoid his verbal and spiritual abuser. He began to doubt reality and was tempted to believe the lies he was being told!

It was a very hot summer; there was no air conditioning. A few people dropped dead in the fields or on the streets. It was too hot to sleep inside so John slept outside on the balcony. In spite of mosquito netting he was bitten by mosquitoes. John developed a severe headache then a high fever and shaking chills. Rev. Morris, however, refused to have John see a doctor; he insisted that John keep working, telling John he had a spiritual problem that he must confess. The last thing John could remember was Rev. Morris's angry face as he strode toward him, shouting, and pointing an accusing finger at him. John learned much later that he had gone completely berserk and had fought with the police when they were called. It took six policemen to subdue him. Because he had assaulted police officers, he was taken to the criminal ward of the worst mental institution in the country. It was widely reported that no inmate ever left that facility alive!

John soon realized that he was in a mental institution. He also realized that he had the choice between being killed by the guards, or by the inmates. But, was there a third choice? No human being could save him! He was like Daniel in the lions' den. Could Daniel's God still save him? Because of all the abuse he had suffered, he was beginning to doubt that God existed. Now he would know for sure! He became very calm. He would soon have absolute proof if there was a loving God. He would have to put God to the test! If he was still alive the next day, he would know for sure that God was real! The pain had been so severe that he couldn't breathe. His hands were turning blue. He called on God. Suddenly the fear was gone. He could feel God's presence. The pain subsided, and he stopped coughing up blood. When the abusive gang of inmates saw John was on his feet

again, they rushed in for the kill! But this time they suddenly turned around and fled, screaming in terror. Several more times they attacked; but they appeared to run into an invisible wall around John. The peace and presence of the Lord John felt was worth all the trials and pain he had experienced. God became so real to him! The inmates and even the guards then stayed away from John. Up to that point, he had not been able to eat very much. Several times he had been assaulted and robbed of all his food. No wonder he was so thin!

John then saw a familiar water tower through a high window, he now knew his location. He had been told that no one left there alive! John then became acquainted with Bill who had been there for many years. He was very well educated and knew some Psychology.. Bill said that he had been admitted with an acute toxic psychosis but had completely recovered. As soon as he was admitted, his loving family, as well as his friends, completely disowned him! They refused to have any contact with him! Most of the inmates had cerebral syphilis and would not recover. The guards had given over control to an organized gang of sex crazed, sadistic, homicidal maniacs! They wanted the inmates to be quiet at all times. The Inmate “Enforcers” could be bribed with a pack of cigarettes to assault or kill anyone! Vocal or sane inmates had to be silenced at any cost. Bill said that he had seen several inmates killed by the guards or the inmates, because they had regained their sanity! The guards were careful not to leave any visible bruises on the bodies. They would sign out the bodies as dying of syphilis or tuberculosis so that the Coroner would not want to even examine the bodies. Relatives seldom claimed the bodies! There was a large cemetery on the Grounds where unclaimed bodies were buried. New graves were being dug every week! The Coroner, an elected official, usually had no medical training. He tried to avoid any negative publicity and made sure his name appeared in the newspaper as often as possible so he would be re-elected! John subsequently recalled times when he heard blood-curdling screams and thuds followed by eerie silence, and then a little later seeing bodies being wheeled away. Bill told John that the guards would never allow a sane person to walk out of the institution; the guards had too much to lose. In order to survive, Bill said he would act crazy whenever the guards were watching him. John then realized he was a marked man! A chill went up and down his spine. He remembered that the “Enforcers” had just been given a new supply of cigarettes!

Meanwhile, back at the Church and Mission, John was missed. The workers kept asking Rev. Morris what had happened to John. His only reply was that John was suffering for his sins and was beyond redemption. No one should be concerned about him! Two Godly women, who had been very impressed with John, sensed that somehow John was in danger. They recalled Rev. Morris’s tirade at the Annual Meeting. They had heard rumors that John had experienced a “nervous breakdown”. They checked with local hospitals and the mental institution. All denied that John had been admitted there. They finally located one of the policemen involved in John’s incarceration. He confirmed that John had been admitted to the very Institution that had just denied it. The ladies called the Mayor, then the Governor and their Congressman. Finally, after the newspapers were contacted, the two ladies were able to visit John. Meanwhile the guards had tried to get rid of John but they were now under great scrutiny. They kept trying to bribe their

“enforcers” to “take care” of John, but by now these inmates were scared of John. They said John was surrounded by fierce creatures protecting him!

The ladies were outraged when they saw John’s bruises and his emaciated condition! John no longer showed any sign of a mental illness. John was examined by six different psychologists and a physician. He was amazed at his own divinely given clarity of mind. He had to give the right answers to many trick questions. He was able to recall dates and times and gave correct answers to difficult Math problems. John was finally released. He stayed in one of the ladies’ home and regained his strength. Miraculously, all assault charges by the Police against John were dropped. The Police report was sealed!

John returned to God’s Bible School that spring (1930). The April 14, 1930 Census lists him as Chief Cook at GBS. That summer he spent his two weeks’ vacation at the Oakdale Free Methodist Mission in the Kentucky Mountains where he dug a well for the school. He had learned that skill as well, working with his dad in Colorado! The first Sunday there, John rode a horse six miles and preached at Rock Lick, where I was born four and a half years later. On the way back he preached the funeral of a young man who had died from a head injury, leaving a fourteen year old wife. They had just been married the previous week! He felt God calling him to that work. He had never seen such severe poverty and spiritual depravity.

John was given back his job as head of the kitchen at God’s Bible school. He graduated from GBS in 1931. He then enrolled in Summer School at Central Academy in McPherson, Kansas, where he then graduated from high school in June, 1932. He married Edna Butler in Kansas City on July 31, 1932. They served in the Kentucky Mountains for four years, then moved to Smyrna, Tennessee, where he pastored the Church while attending Nashville Auto-Diesel College. On January 27, 1938 the Riley family arrived in South Africa where John taught Motor Mechanics at Edwaleni Technical College, a Free Methodist Mission School. Every lecture included a sermon illustrating the similarities between car repairs and maintenance and a person’s spiritual life. Bible courses, music, advanced English, Leadership, and debate were also taught. Many of his students were converted and started Churches when they returned to their villages. Some became Preachers and Evangelists. Several of them became Community Leaders. John and Edna raised four children who are serving the Lord. Three of them returned to Africa as missionaries.

After his escape from his “Lion’s Den”, conditions at Mental Institutions began to improve. Guards were screened and monitored. Medical examiners with Forensic training replaced Coroners. Every death in Mental Institutions was being questioned. So John realized that his experience had saved many innocent lives! John later saw how his terrible experiences prepared him for the future. He had scars on his lungs and limited lung capacity from his chest injuries. This kept reminding him of his experience and God’s deliverance! Other people tried to brain wash him and lure him into Cults and Bondage, but he could say: “Been there, done that.” Others told him that he had been punished for some un-confessed sin, but he recalled that, at the time when he was suffering the most, and was in the greatest danger, he had been nearer to God than he had

ever been before. He had absolute proof of God's love and protection! No longer did John fear individuals or the future, he was free indeed! By a miracle, John had escaped from the "Lions' Den". Daniel's God was still strong enough to deliver him! John often stated: "The safest place on earth is in the center of God's will."

John found out years later that he must have had a toxic psychotic episode due to viral encephalitis that was caused by mosquito bites. This condition is often fatal.

*FOOTNOTE : This was written by John Riley's son, Dr. Paul Riley. It was difficult to get all this information from his dad. John found that most people did not understand mental illness. Many thought it was demon possession. Others thought it was permanent and inherited from "faulty" ancestors. Some even feared that it could be contagious! The victim was often abandoned by his family and friends. John was strongly advised by a psychiatrist to never mention his mental illness; otherwise he would never be employed. For many years John told no one else except his wife, Edna. Also, he did not want to speak evil about his abuser or dwell on his past troubles! God would have to be his judge! Paul was also advised to never mention Rev. Morris's behavior. (This is not his real name.) That would make Christians look bad. But it is important that Christians know they can be lead astray by false teachers. Anybody who claims to have a direct line to God and who insists that nobody can question anything they do or say should be avoided. Anybody who steals the JOY OF THE LORD from you and puts you in bondage to him is a FALSE PROPHET! (SEE PHOTOS ON THE NEXT TWO PAGES)*

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John Riley (far left) garage foreman at GBS

John Riley (right) head chef in charge of food services GBS



John Riley as a Texas Gringo 1928  
Taken at the Alamo