

PRAISE THE LORD. BUT PASS THE FOOD!

As told to Paul M. Riley, John Riley's son

“John Riley, I sat in the dining room for over an hour! I didn't hear you back here in the kitchen praising the Lord, not even once! The Bible says that we must praise the Lord in all circumstances! You are letting the Devil get the best of you.” The voice was that of David Brown, John Riley's self appointed spiritual mentor (a.k.a. spiritual tormentor). It was a busy Sunday afternoon in 1930 in the kitchen of God's Bible School (GBS) in Cincinnati, Ohio. John Riley had returned to GBS a few months previously after spending almost two years doing missionary work in southern Texas. Now, again, he was in charge of food services at GBS. It was early Sunday afternoon, John and his overworked staff had been serving Sunday dinner to an unexpectedly large crowd of students and guests.

At the busiest time in the kitchen, David would suddenly appear and start admonishing John for his lack of religious enthusiasm. He would tell John that if he was a devout Christian he would be leaping and praising the Lord. David liked to show his own spiritual superiority. He carried a large Bible under his arm wherever he went and would suddenly start shouting and praising the Lord whenever he had a suitable audience. He was a supply pastor for a nearby Church.

David Brown had several brand new tailor-made suits, several pairs of new shoes, and drove the only new car on campus. He always carried a large wad of money with him. His tuition was being paid by rich members of his home church and he could be heard at times on the phone asking for more money! In contrast to David, John wore donated clothes which he had to keep mending. The soles of his only pair of shoes were worn clear through. He cut out several pieces of cardboard to make insoles. He changed these at least twice a day to protect his socks. He would always kneel facing the audience so no one would see the soles of his shoes! John had worked hard since he was nine years old. He had been homeless and he had survived several illnesses. He had just returned that spring from a Mission in Texas where he had suffered mental and spiritual abuse by the Mission Director and then had viral encephalitis which caused him to develop a toxic psychosis. He was placed in a mental hospital among the criminally insane. There he was savagely attacked by the inmates as well as the guards. Only a miracle saved his life! With God's help, he had recovered and had returned to GBS a much better Christian.

David would frequently go into the kitchen, walk into the freezer room and select choice cuts of meat and demand that John prepare them for him. He would sample and criticize the food being prepared! He also wanted John to buy food that was not in stock. He refused to eat ordinary food. (What was good enough for ordinary people was not good enough for him.) When John would kindly explain to David that he was too busy and had no money to cater to all of David's demands, David would accuse John of slipping spiritually. John privately considered David to be another one of the “Job's comforters” he had met in the past two years. John was firm but polite with David telling him he had to serve the others first. Still John went out of his way to serve the well known preachers and evangelists who taught or held Revival meetings at GBS. The room where they stayed was called “the Prophet's Chamber”. John was never too busy to bring them drinks and snacks and prepare special diets for them. When Rev. E.E. Shellhammer had a bad flare up of his stomach ulcer, John brought him warm bread and milk which helped heal the ulcer. John's favorite was “Uncle Bud” Robinson. Uncle Bud was quite old and

moved slowly but had such a Godly aura. He used his speech impediment to great advantage. John received a great blessing every time he served Uncle Bud in his room. As John was leaving the room, Uncle Bud would always say “The Lord bleth thee brother”. These words always sent chills up and down John’s spine. These Godly men contributed much to John’s spiritual education. These Saints were completely nonjudgmental! They were so full of encouragement for John!

When John Riley returned to the kitchen at GBS after being gone for two years he found everyone complaining about the food. Many students no longer ate in the GBS dining room. The depression had made it necessary to spend the bare minimum for food and the cooks had no training or had left. John stuck to the budget, cut out waste and found more honest suppliers. From a local butcher, and a library book, he learned how to cut up meat. He bought whole beef and hog carcasses so he made sure he bought the very best for the price. This improved the quality of the food and still saved a lot of money. In Texas John had learned how to cook delicious Mexican food which became very popular when he tried it at GBS. He also continued to cook previously popular dishes and was creative with leftovers. He personally baked delicious rolls and loaves of bread. Soon more and more students were eating at GBS. Then faculty members, their families, and guests were coming. Members of a growing church that met on campus were coming for Sunday dinner. The money paid by the guests also brought in more money for better supplies!

John’s success in the kitchen was almost his undoing. The overworked kitchen staff was threatening to quit! If John didn’t get more help on Sundays there would be big problems. Dr. Standley, the school president, met with the kitchen staff. He found out that the workers were too busy to go to church and were working through the night on Saturday as well as working late on Sunday night. A solution had to be found quickly!

John was praying the night before he was to meet Dr. Standley when suddenly he had an inspiration. If every student would work an hour in the kitchen just one Sunday a month the problem would be solved! Dr. Standley liked the plan and his office made out a schedule that was approved by the Student Council.

As soon as David heard about the plan he started complaining! “I have to shake hands with a lot of people,” he moaned. “They will make fun of my dishwasher hands. They expect me to be preparing my sermon or be praying with them, not washing dishes!” At first David refused to serve his time in the kitchen. All the other “volunteers” enjoyed helping, many worked more than their allotted time. After a “dose of reality” from Dr. Standley, David showed up after Sunday dinner.

“John, please give me something quick I have to go calling this afternoon,” David pleaded. “How lucky for you,” John replied. “This large cooking pot takes me fifteen minutes to clean, it shouldn’t take you more than thirty minutes then you can be on your way. But first come into my office take off your jacket, vest, shirt and tie, then put on this tunic otherwise you will ruin your beautiful suit.” “No way”, David replied “what if the president or someone important walked in, they might think I worked here!” John left David to check on the other “volunteers” in the dining room. Twenty minutes later he returned to the kitchen. David had somehow turned on the steam to his large cooking pot! He was holding up one coat sleeve with one hand and making half hearted dabs at the inside of the pot with the other. His suit was soaked with sweat. John turned off the steam and left David to finish. As John left, he heard David using some rather shocking language; he certainly wasn’t praising the Lord! When John returned about fifteen

minutes later David was nowhere to be found. Then he heard banging on the pipes in the freezer room. When he opened the door he heard the weirdest sounds! There was David speechless! He apparently had been sneaking into the walk in freezer to cool off! He had been very thirsty! The last time, he had tried to lick the thick layer of frost from the pipes and his tongue was stuck fast. John ran out and reached into the warm dirty dish water and pulled out the dishrag and squeezed the water over the end of David's tongue freeing him. As John left, he couldn't resist a parting shot. "David Brown, you have been here in the kitchen for over an hour, I haven't heard you shouting and praising the Lord, not even once. What's wrong with you? Are you giving in to the Devil?"

David had a large blister on his tongue. He had a temporary speech impediment so was unable to preach that night! From then on David kept a lower profile. He stopped trying to show off his spiritual superiority. When his turn in the kitchen came the next month, David showed up early; dressed appropriately, and did his work quietly and efficiently. He had finally learned that often the best way for him to praise the Lord was for him to do his work cheerfully, efficiently, and to the best of his ability. Somehow he had failed to learn this in his Bible School Courses.

That Thanksgiving John and his staff and many volunteers served Thanksgiving Dinner to several hundred underprivileged people. These people were brought by buses from the poorest sections of the city. The meal was laced with a liberal dose of gospel. As usual John told a gripping episode of his life. He was dressed in his Head Chef outfit. There were tears in his eyes as he said goodbye. It would be his last Thanksgiving at GBS. Imagine John's surprise when he saw David and members of his Church cheerfully serving the meal, encouraging the patrons, hugging the children, washing the dishes and cleaning up the mess after the meal. David had finally used his leadership and charm and few kitchen experiences to recruit a large number of volunteers! It was a great relief for John to have so much unexpected help! There was no leaping or shouting this time, just hard work.

David went on to be a famous preacher. John graduated from GBS in 1931, and then in June 1932 he graduated from Central Academy in McPherson, Kansas. On July 31, 1932 he married Edna Butler in Kansas City. Edna had grown up on a sheep ranch near John's home. Like John she had found the Lord at Eagle Bluff Free Methodist Church. Her father had died in 1927. When her mother died in 1930 she took her brother Alva, age 12, and sister Vera, age 11, to the Life Line Children's Home, a Free Methodist orphanage in Kansas City where Edna worked to pay for her two siblings. After they were married, John and Edna loaded up Alva and Vera and went to the Kentucky Mountains to serve as missionaries. Their sons David and Paul were born there. Then John and Edna moved to Smyrna, Tennessee where John pastored the Free Methodist Church while attending Nashville Auto-Diesel College and where daughter Lois was born. In 1937. Then they went to South Africa where John taught Motor Mechanics at Edwaleni Technical College at a Free Methodist Mission. Their son Thomas was born in 1938. Many of the students at Edwaleni were converted and became spiritual leaders in their communities. John always led by the example he set. Some of John's characteristics can be described in the words of Paul Riley's pastor when Paul was in medical school. "Patience, without lassitude; firmness, without aggression; meekness, without timidity; confrontation, without hostility." In Paul's opinion these traits often shout praises to God louder than words! PAUL M. RILEY, MD, FACS, Email: hlinza@ymail.com

