

MY CONVERSION

By John M. Riley

(As told to students at LaDue Chapel, Greenville College, in 1958)

Dr. LaDue, Faculty, and fellow students, I count it a privilege to glorify my precious Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. I am here as His child, not because my parents were Christians, for they were not. Neither did I grow up with young people of the Church, but with Godless young people of the most Godless community of Eastern Colorado. I lived a lonely life, for neighbors were few and far between. There was little chance for religious instruction. The preachers from the cities usually received such a warm reception, when they came our way, that they seldom returned. As a result, I grew up as ignorant of God's plan of Salvation, as a Hottentot in Africa!

Life there was not only lonely, but was also cruel. My father was a homesteader, an unwanted intruder on the rolling plains, whose buffalo grass made rich the few sheep and cattle farmers who lived there. I have vivid memories of my father's near despair when we would return from the store or from a neighbor's to find our crops ruined by a herd of cattle or sheep. The fence had been deliberately cut! These things, along with the blizzards and thirty degrees below zero weather, the droughts and the hailstorms of summer, seemed to combine to drive most of the homesteaders back east. These things made some of us hard and broke others. I know that some of these early influences have left a mark on me. Once at Bible School the Registrar asked me to investigate a haunted room. [At least the girls thought it was haunted.] As I turned the key in the night latch of the door with my left hand, my right hand went instinctively towards my hip pocket, even though I had not carried a gun for some years. However, none of these experiences affected me like the time I met Christ and He became my personal Savior.

Father died when I was away from home in the first year of High School. Although I was raised to be a man, I cried when I had to leave school to try to make a living for my six brothers and sisters, all younger than me. I worked on a ranch, while mother, her brother, and children tried to farm the soil that was starting to blow away. Real ranch life was far from the modern drug store cowboy stuff. Of course there were some thrills. But such things as being able to stay on a bucking horse; or training those demons of the prairie to be faithful ranch horses; or chasing coyotes and bringing them in alive; or keeping your face straight in a poker game. All these were thrills that passed as did our short summers.

Sundays were given to sports; we had no other time for them! The Cheyenne Community baseball team was the best for miles around. Herman Cusick, our shortstop, was especially good, as was his pitcher brother Wesley. One Sunday, as we lined up our team, the manager was furious! When I asked, where was Wesley, he said; "Oh he went over to Eagle Bluff and got religion." I wondered what new thing this was. Some of the players said they were "Christians." They went to Sunday School since it was on Sunday, and then to the ball game in the afternoon. Then we missed Herman. The manager was so angry he could hardly tell me that he had also got religion. God talked to me as we lost that ball game.

As I started the work week I wondered what had happened to the brothers. I had relatives who were deacons in the church, asked God's blessing at the table, then would tell a dirty story, that made me blush, before we were through eating. I don't know what the hired

girl did. I dared not look her way! Yes, I had heard of the little church eight miles away. We could hear the people singing as we went by on a hunt or to a ball game. We thought they were good people. Yes, you could even trust them in a horse trade, but they went a little too far with their religion! Now they were starting to break up our baseball team. Then I remembered a strange girl, as we called her at high school, seemed to be of the same crowd. There, in that wicked town, that had started with a saloon, she stood for Christ and manifested His spirit. She tried to deal with me about my soul. She even got me to go forward in a protracted meeting in one of the churches. It did not “pan out” right as they say out there, but she said that she would continue to pray for me. I shook myself. What was eating on me? Was it her prayers? Surely not. About Wednesday that week, the converted shortstop came to see me where I was working. Yes I knew it was him, but there was something different about him. He told me that the Lord had saved him and wanted me to come to the revival meeting that was in its fourth week. I tried to find excuses, but he would not go away until I promised to come.

That Saturday night I was among complete strangers. Strangers, because they did not frequent the barn dances, and other things that our crowd did. There were testimonies before the preaching, and such testimonies. I heard testimonies in the church where my uncle was deacon. I knew these testimonies by heart. “I have been doing the things I should not do, and have been leaving undone the things I should do. But I want all of you to pray for me that I will keep on in my own weak way.” Why, I thought, did they wish to keep on in such a way? As a sinner I could testify as they did, except that I was sick of the way I was going, and did not want any prayers to continue in it! But these testimonies were different! They seemed to come from the hearts of these people, people whose faces glowed with something I felt was akin to ecstasy. I believe that these testimonies would have had me convinced that this was the life I was seeking, even if there was no preacher.

Then Rev. S.K. Wheatlake preached with heavenly unction on: “What will it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his own soul?” I thought I would be a fool to leave that place without Christ as my personal Savior. No, it wasn’t a passing sensation that I should join these folks. It was a decision that took all that there was in me. I knew the old crowd would ostracize me. I battled with God and myself as I stood in the back row while the altar call was given, then closed. There I settled it that these people would be my people and their God my God. I would either have what they had, or they would have me on their hands until I did. Beside me was a bootlegger who looked as sick at heart as I was. I said: “let’s go forward.” He shook his head and said: “Not me.” I stepped out into the aisle and managed to get to the front alone. I tried to pray but did not know how, but I knew and God knew that I was truly repentant. Someone opened his Bible and had me read: “He that cometh unto Me I will in no wise cast out.” I realized that these were the words of Jesus. Could I, who was a part of the Western Code that a man’s word is as good as gold, trust my fellow men more than Christ. I had to believe these words or make Christ a liar. I said: “Lord, I believe You will do as You said you would.” In that moment I became a new person! That guilty feeling before God was gone! I was like an enslaved man being set free. I was not afraid of what the old crowd would say. When I reached home about midnight it seemed natural to kneel beside my bed and commit myself to God. It seemed natural to go to Sunday school and Church the next day, and ride past the ball game on my way home to do the chores so I could go back to Church again that night. I can’t explain just how it was done, but it was done. My uncle, when talking to his friends, would

tap his head and say: "John is clear gone now, he is talking to his plate!" The old friends gave me two weeks to be back with them doing sinful things. More than a quarter of a century has passed. Many of the old crowd have passed on to an early death as a result of their sinful ways. Others are living a veritable hell on earth, while others believed that since God saved me, He could do the same for them. They have surrendered their lives to Christ.

This was only the beginning of a wonderful walk with Him. I expect to keep walking with Him until I get so close to heaven that He will say there is no use for me to return to earth.

To you, my fellow students who know Christ as your personal Savior, your life has just begun. You who do not know Him as such, you will not know what is true living until you allow Christ to make you His own!

NOTE: John Riley returned in 1956 from missionary service in South Africa. He then worked his way through Greenville College, where he gave this talk. He graduated at the age of fifty-six. He then was pastor of several small Nebraska Free Methodist Churches for the next eighteen years. He always served where the need was greatest, and the pay was the least. The most money he ever earned was his social security checks. In spite of his "poverty" all four of his children were able to go to college. Then he and his wife graduated from college when they were over fifty years of age. Edna taught school in one room schoolhouses while John pastored churches in Nebraska.

John's Spiritual Conversion resulted in an abrupt change in his life. It started his missionary "journey" described in other documents. It is also gave material for some of the stories on my web site.

This chapel talk was copied from the original "manuscript". It was written in pencil on pieces of brown wrapping paper, found among Edna Riley's papers, misplaced and finally rediscovered and copied in January, 2010. John Riley died August 12, 1982. He was ready to die. The Scripture "There is now no condemnation", reassured him of his final destiny. John's widow, Edna Riley, died in August, 1997. She looked forward to meeting John in Heaven!

Copied and edited by John Riley's son, Paul M. Riley. Email:-hlinza@ymail.com