

# The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ October 2010

## The Day the Electric Arrived: Alleluia!

*The Rev. Dr. Wayne L. Smith*

I never met my father and did not learn that my favorite aunt was actually my biological mother until I was a teenager. My older brother and I were raised instead by my maternal grandmother and my step-grandfather. Times were tough in our part of Pennsylvania, which was slow to recover from the Depression, but we were loved into wholeness by my grandmother, a wonderful, loving curmudgeon of a character. She had the eyes of a hawk. Little escaped her scrutiny.

To improve our family fortunes, we moved to Baltimore during World War II. My grandmother operated a boarding house for defense workers, and my step-grandfather learned to weld and found a good job in ship-building. The hard times were over! Even my brother and I got in on the act. He worked in a neighborhood drugstore dispensing all kinds of ice cream and soda fountain goodies from a marble-topped counter while I wandered all over wartime Baltimore selling *The Baltimore American*. I considered myself prosperous and urbanized; a real “city slicker” as I freely hopped on and off trolley cars selling my newspapers and proudly displaying the neat oval newsboy’s silver badge pinned on my chest (kind of like a sheriff’s badge in a Western).

As the war was drawing to a close, our family moved back to our roots in Pennsylvania and bought an eleven-acre “dirt farm” in Lancaster County, a mile away from the small village of Quarryville. I was twelve years old at the time, and about to experience a startling new lifestyle.

Instead of our urban jobs, we were raising vegetables, such as tomatoes and a lot of corn. There were two small corn fields, one up on our hill and one across from the house. The rest of the farm was divided into a small pasture and a wooded hillside. But mostly I remember the dirt that made up our “dirt farm.” It seemed to this city boy that all we did involved dirt: planting, cultivating, weeding, picking, vegetable gathering, and working with a few cows and a flock of chickens.

One change in my lifestyle was even more startling than the dirt. The small house that stood on our farm was a house without electricity. It was as though a magical time machine had picked us up and transported us back into the late nineteenth century.

Lack of electricity created a whole new host of chores for me and my brother. Every couple of days we would take our red Express Wagon and walk the mile to Quarryville to get a fifty- or seventy-five-pound block of ice. During the hottest months, the block always arrived back at the house a lot smaller than it was supposed to be. We probably blamed it on melting, but my

grandmother seemed to know exactly how much ice had been lost to melting and how much had been lost to two boys helping themselves to samples to keep cool.

An outside pump was our only source of water. If we wanted any water, we had to pump it and bring it inside. We had to chop all the wood to fuel the large black stove with silver trim in our kitchen. We learned to live with kerosene lamps and learned how to trim the wicks and carefully light them. Behind our house was a much smaller house with a crescent design in the door. It was a special two-seater and was air-conditioned naturally. On cold winter mornings we set speed records traveling between the two houses!

Meanwhile, just a half mile away, awaited the Promised Land! There the Pennsylvania Power and Light Company had stopped with their last electric pole. There, frozen in time and space, lay our deliverance from the nineteenth century. Like the biblical Joshua, we could see the Promised Land but not yet get there. So, like Joshua, we waited.

One day, a little over a year later, up the road came the electric company. They progressed from neighbor to neighbor along our country road. Within a few days, an electrician came and wired us up. I followed that blessed electrician from room to room. I remember how our family gathered in the kitchen when the very first lights came on. That was the day of days. That day the Electric arrived: Alleluia! It was an Electric Epiphany. Alleluia! And even on a dirt farm, that was an earth-shaking, family-celebrating day! No more ice blocks, kerosene lanterns, pumping at the well, or chopping firewood. Alleluia!

Later, I connected that moment with Genesis and Creation and God saying, "Let there be light." Over the years, I have also come to realize that my Electric Epiphany on the dirt farm was just one of many experiences made "electric" in my life.

Most recently, I went through two painful months with a very herniated disc. Then I had to wait a final few weeks before surgery. In the waiting period, I "survived" with pain pills and ice packs. Never before in my long life had I thought much of ice . . . except in a drink glass. Now I know that an ice pack may be an epiphany, a teacher, a bringer of light.

I have learned not to disparage the simple things in our lives, like ice packs or dirt farms; the down times, the disappointments, and the failures. You never know what may be coming up the road! God has yet more light to break forth.



Father Smith has been happily retired just over ten years. He has kept busy serving as part-time interims: more than six-plus years at The Church of the Ascension in Atlantic City and, currently, three-plus years at The Church of the Good Shepherd in Berlin, New Jersey. For six years he was the Chaplain to the Retired Clergy and Spouses of the Diocese of New Jersey. He continues to enjoy writing, preaching, and teaching. Possibly the happiest current times are with his two lively grandchildren, Jessica, 12, and Matthew, 10.