

## On the Sidewalks of New York

### 24. An Adirondack Summer

The summer of 1950 was a point of transition. It was the experience which tied together my past and my future. The city had always been my context. My summer experiences had sharpened my focus on my roots. I began to see that my ministry should be among working people. There were few people at Union who came from a working class background. Bob Davidson reminded me on one occasion that he could name only three persons during our time at Union: Bob himself, me and another person I don't remember.

As I began my second year at Union, my goal was to finish the course work and get on with my vocation. I had two years to go. I went about my seminary work with a new purpose. I took all the required courses and concentrated on my courses with Niebuhr. I looked forward to field work. It was the one way of keeping in touch with the reality of congregational life, even if the schedule meant only Sunday and one other night a week.

In September, the Seminary field work director, Art Swift, sent Shelby Rooks and me to a congregation in Palisades, New Jersey. Shelby Rooks was the son of the well known black Presbyterian pastor who led the St. James Presbyterian congregation in Harlem. Shelby's mother was the famous black singer Dorothy Maynard. St. James was one of New York Presbytery's few black congregations. I had visited the congregation as a member of a young people's group at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church when we were engaged in cooperative interracial youth programs.

Shelby had the single room next to Jim MacNaughton's and mine on the sixth floor of Hastings Hall. He was a suave individual and a smooth talker. I was impressed with his ability to knock out course papers with great ease. Most of us would spend long hours researching and agonizing. Shelby never seemed to get down to work until the day before the paper was due. Then I would hear him in the next room, banging away on his typewriter. In the morning he would have his paper in hand.

Before coming to Union, Shelby had moved from the Presbyterian Church to become a Congregationalist. He would become a leader in his chosen denomination. After the union between the Congregationalists and the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1957, Shelby went on to a succession of leadership positions in the United Church of Christ. In the 1970s Shelby was called to the Presidency of Chicago Theological Seminary (CTS) while I was Director of the Institute on the Church in Urban Industrial Society (ICUIS). We were one block away from one another. After his time at CTS he became head of the Theological Education Fund and finally was called to be Executive Secretary of the Board of Homeland Ministries of the United Church of Christ.

In the Fall of 1950 Shelby and I both made the journey out to the Palisades. Shelby went out for the first interview. The Palisades Congregational Church was a working class congregation in a tight New Jersey community which overlooked the Hudson River. It had a perfect view of the skyline of Manhattan. It was a community which was also known for its Mafia connections. The core of the congregation were faithful Italian Protestants. In a community like the Palisades, Italian Protestants had to be tenacious believers. The pastor, Bill C. was a slight, amiable man of liberal persuasion. Shelby was such a polished individual I did not count on getting the job in the Palisades. I was a Presbyterian and Shelby was a Congregationalist.

After his interview Shelby caught me in the sixth floor hall. He told me the interview went well but he didn't think he would get the job. Nor did he feel that it was his kind of community.

As matters turned out the pastor hired me on for the year. He put me to work immediately. I was assigned to preach within the first month I was there. This was to be my first "official" sermon. During my first field work assignment in East Orange I had not been given such an opportunity.

The Saturday night before I was to preach in the Palisades, a violent wind, rain and thunder storm descended upon the New York metropolitan region. When I awakened on Sunday morning there was some question whether I

would be able to get transportation to New Jersey. I started out early and caught a bus over the George Washington Bridge into Palisades. The town was in a shambles. Tree limbs and branches were strewn everywhere. Signs had been ripped off shops and were lying in the street. Neon signs hung twisted on the sides of buildings.

When I got to the church, I was told the electricity was off. The pastor decided to hold the service in the living room of the manse. We moved a lectern over from the church, brought over the floral arrangements and waited for the congregation. They filled the living room and out into the hall. We sang our hymns without accompaniment, but with great spirit. I was so moved by the spontaneity and the informality that I lost my nervousness. It was great to begin my preaching career in a "house" church.

After sending the flock forth into the wreckage of Palisades, the pastor caught me as I was leaving, "That was a challenge for you.....to begin your career on the heels of a storm. We always worry about how seminary students will preach. They come with the latest theology they're hearing and preach way over people's heads. But you were simple....down to earth, and that was good. You rose to the occasion."

Back at the seminary I was doing what came naturally to me: engaging in politics. During our Middler year, Jim MacNaughton and I decided we needed a more lively student council. "We need to deal with the issues in the seminary community." We asked Bill Cary - William Sterling Cary, to be exact - if he would run for president of the council. Bill was a Baptist from New Jersey. He was one of eight black students in a community of 430 seminarians at Union Seminary. That was about a two per cent ratio.

Bill was a mature, solid student, who was easy to know. Bill and I worked together in the Refectory at Union. I knew from our conversations that it had not been easy for him to attend Union Seminary. Within his Baptist community he had been expected to choose a seminary which would better prepare him for a ministry in a black Baptist congregation. When he decided to come to Union, he knew that he might have to find another religious

home. It did not take much effort on our part to get Bill elected president for our Senior year.

Bill Cary became a pastor in a Harlem congregation of the United Church of Christ. He later was elected president of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. I renewed acquaintance with Bill Cary in the 1970s when he came to Chicago as the Association President of the Northern Illinois Conference of the United Church of Christ. This was while I was at ICUIS in the seminary community in Hyde Park.

The academic year moved quickly and before I knew it the summer of 1951 was upon us. This was the last summer to use for a learning experience before graduating in June, 1952. Another unique possibility for summer work came up in the spring. Jim MacNaughton caught wind of it and asked me, "How would you like to work in the Adirondacks this summer?"

"Doing what?"

"Preaching and working outdoors in the mountains," Jim told me.

"That sounds great. Where did you hear about this?"

"One of the seminarians from upstate New York told me about it. Frank Reed, the pastor at Old Forge in the Utica Presbytery has been scouting for seminarians who might like to work in the Adirondacks this summer. It's like the work you did last summer in Pittsburgh, except this time it's in the mountains. We would also have preaching assignments."

"When do we begin and how do we know where we will be assigned?"

"As soon as classes finish we head upstate. We'll meet Frank Reed at Paul Smith College and he'll make the assignments then. I'll commit us if you're ready to spend the summer in the Adirondacks."

"This sounds like a good counterpoint to the steel mills last summer. That was an invaluable experience, not only the work but our seminar

discussions. It's the only way to learn. After being cooped up in a mill last year - the open air, the trees, the sunshine will be a welcome change."

Little did I know what I was saying. I was to see plenty of trees that summer. Six of us from Union Seminary signed up for the trip to the Adirondacks. When we got to Tupper Lake we met Frank Reed, the initiator of the summer project. Frank Reed was a tall, angular man who appeared to have spent many summers and winters in the outdoors. He looked like he might have been a lumberjack. The Adirondack project gained immediate respect with the presence of Frank Reed.

As Frank was describing the different Adirondack parishes, one project called for two persons. Since Jim and I were in this together, we said we would take that assignment.

"It will be with Jay Johnson in the Adirondack Larger Parish in the St. Lawrence Presbytery." Frank Reed said. "There are four congregations in the Larger Parish: Wanakeena where the Johnson family lives, Star Lake, Cranberry Lake, and Newton Falls."

I immediately liked the sound of the towns' names.....lakes and falls, with an Indian name thrown in.....Wanakeena.

"The people in all four congregations don't add up to one hundred," Frank continued, "but during the summertime the region changes with summer residents and tourists coming up for their vacations. Syracuse University has a School of Forestry at Wanakeena. It provides some stability to the Wanakeena congregation. I think you will also be working with the School of Forestry during the week." That intrigued me even more. What kind of work could we be doing for the School of Forestry?

After we finished our discussion of assignments, we headed off for Wanakeena, which was to be the base of our operations. That Jim had his car was a boon for us. It was, in fact, a boon for me. This was the summer I would learn to drive. Jim was to bear the brunt of those lessons. I had felt out of it all these years. Most young people learn to drive by the time they

were sixteen or seventeen. I was twenty-six and still without a driver's license.

As we drove west to Wanakeena from Tupper Lake the scenery was magnificent. Plenty of wide open spaces, rolling countryside interspersed with lakes, and thousands of trees. The road stretched out in front of us with little traffic. A good place to learn how to drive, I thought.

We arrived in Wanakeena, a spot hidden away in the midst of all those mountains. It was a small community whose major institution was the Syracuse School of Forestry. In fact the entire economy of the community depended upon the School. The manse for the Adirondack Larger Parish was in Wanakeena.

Jay and Jean Johnson were waiting for us, along with their two young sons. As soon as we met them, we knew it would be a good summer. They were happy to see us and greeted us literally with open arms. It was like they had been waiting for us a long time. They were also going to enjoy this summer.

We would have rooms in the manse. We would take our meals there. We would have the run of the manse when the Johnsons took off on their vacation. Jay outlined the summer's assignments. Jim and I would alternate preaching every Sunday at two of the four congregations. There would be an early service at one congregation and a later service at the other, with enough time to get from one church to the other. Newton Falls and Star Lake were paired together, and Cranberry Lake and Wanakeena was the other combination. After we finished our services we would return to Wanakeena for a Sunday chicken dinner at the School of Forestry.

We would be employed during the week, Jay Johnson told us, with a project of the School of Forestry. One of the staff of the School would take us out into the mountains to do white pine "weevilling."

"What's that," I puzzled, "white pine 'weevilling?'"

"I'll let the foreman tell you on Monday morning when you begin," Jay answered.

On Monday morning we walked over to the School of Forestry armed with our brown bag lunches, which Jean Johnson had prepared. The School was a cluster of buildings down the road from the Wanakeena Presbyterian Church. Jay took us into the office and introduced us to what staff was around on Monday morning. We were told our supervisor was out at the work shed. He would meet us there for our work assignment.

We walked to the work shed where a khaki-clad man was loading tools into a truck. He greeted us cordially, but with a certain reserve. His demeanor struck me as a man made for this terrain - a man of the mountains. He was a man of few words. He had spent most of his life walking mountain trails by himself and taking his work seriously. I sensed as he looked at us that he didn't expect much work from us - a couple of seminarians he'd have to supervise for a whole summer. But he would make the most of it.

He finished loading up the tools in the back of the pick-up truck - axes, shovels, wedges, and some sections of long poles. The sections of long poles intrigued me. We climbed in the front seat with him and headed off down the road into the mountains. After we had driven about twenty minutes we drove off the main highway up a dirt road into a mountain. We drove up the road another ten minutes and stopped in a clearing at the edge of the woods. The journey had been in silence, except for small conversation between Jim and myself.

We got down from the truck and unloaded the tools we would need - the axes and the long sections of pole. Then he looked at us and spoke, "This whole section of mountains is a watershed. It was replanted with scotch and white pine in the 1930s during the Roosevelt Administration by the C.C.C. - the Civilian Conservation Corps. It's taken a long time to grow back. We have the responsibility to see that it continues as a watershed. One of the jobs you'll be doing this summer is to help keep these trees healthy and to cut out those trees that are not going to make it."

I looked around me and suddenly remembered the mountains of trees I had seen on our trip to Wanakeena from Tupper Lake. This was not new for Jim who had been raised in Glens Falls in upstate New York. But for a New York City boy it was overwhelming. I would be spending a summer getting close to all those trees.

Our supervisor led us up a narrow path through the woods toward another clearing. We were carrying the axes and the sections of poles with us. He stopped at the edge of the clearing and spoke again: "There are two trees you are going to get know this summer - the scotch pine and the white pine. The scotch pine you're going to cut down and the white pine you're going to 'weevil'."

He took us over to a tree. "This is a scotch pine, which the beavers have gotten to." He pointed to a large scar at the base of the tree. "Beavers, and sometimes porcupines, gnaw into these trees. They leave them so badly scarred that they will have little growth. You look for these trees and you cut them out. Just leave them where they fall."

He walked us through the clearing to the other side of the woods. We stopped. He pointed to the top of a tree. He spoke again, "This is a white pine which has been 'weevilled.' If you look at the top growth of the tree you'll see that it is drooping. That means that the white pine weevil has laid its eggs in the top of that tree and the newly-hatched weevils are eating down into the tree. For this you put these sections of poles together. You notice you have a clipper at the top of one section and a long cord. You position the clipper underneath where you think the weevils are and you clip off the top of the tree. Sometimes it takes three sections of pole and sometimes four." He ended his instructions. "This is your job for the summer."

When he finished, I turned to Jim: "Well, I told you I was looking forward to the out of doors, plenty of fresh air and sunshine.....and plenty of trees."

Jim and I climbed a lot of mountains that summer. We cut out a lot of scotch pine. We carried our long poles up and down the mountain, putting them together, balancing them carefully as we clipped out the white pine weevil.

Sometimes we reached the top of a mountain. We would stop and survey the glory of the Adirondack range with its breathtaking views of the valleys and the lakes below and the mountains in the distance. The cloud formations were spectacular. They could be seen far off in the distance moving down from Canada and the northwest.

Sometimes while we were on the top of a mountain the clouds would roll in and a thunderstorm would catch us with no place to hide. The skies would open and we would be caught in a deluge. When the sun finally broke through we would emerge laughing and soaked to the skin. There was nothing else to be done. After the summer ended, our supervisor had a different view of the perseverance of seminarians.

Our Sunday preaching assignments were really an interlude from our mountain work. We had a lot of time to think about sermon outlines during our solitary walks on the mountain. Needless to say, our sermons that summer were filled with illustrations and stories from our mountain experiences.

As uniform as the terrain of the northern Adirondacks appeared, the congregations in which we served that summer were different in character. Wanakeena was the most homogeneous and the most stable in the Adirondack Larger Parish. It was not large but the membership of the congregation was drawn directly from the faculty, the staff and the students of the School of Forestry. Since Jim and I were living in the manse and working out of the School of Forestry most of our close contacts were with that congregation.

Newton Falls was the most different. It could be characterized as a blue collar congregation since its people were drawn from the taconite mining operation of the Jones and Laughlin Corporation, a Pittsburgh steel company. Taconite, or low grade iron ore, had been mined full scale during World War II when all sources of iron ore were needed. Now there was a question whether J & L would keep the taconite mine open. Often on my mountain top jaunts I could see the J & L mining operation down in the valley. It stood out as a yellow scar in the midst of the green landscape. Even up in the mountains

of New York State my summer experience in Pittsburgh steel was not far behind. I came to realize the connectedness of the U.S. industrial economy and its penetration into all areas of American life.

The Cranberry Lake and Star Lake congregations were largely dependent upon the folks who came to the Adirondacks for their summer vacation. The base of the congregations were the tradespeople and people who had grown up in the area and never left. During the summer the congregations doubled and tripled in size. Cranberry Lake differed in that it drew heavily upon people who had regular summer residences in the region and who often decided to retire in the community. It had a more stable and consistent year round congregation.

Jim and I enjoyed our summer pastorates. Since we worked during the week our Saturday nights were spent burning the midnight oil sermon writing. This was a bad habit to get into in this first opportunity to hone our sermon writing skills. But it was a mutually rewarding experience for both of us. We had opportunity to share our thoughts and to talk about the responses we had had from our congregations.

One of the high points of our week was our after church Sunday dinner. We looked forward to our return to Wanakeena and the chicken dinner served at the School of Forestry. Those who gathered at the dinner tables tended to be the congregation of the Wanakeena Presbyterian Church. They were a jolly crew and welcomed us back heartily from our ministerial forays in the Adirondack Larger Parish. They made their pointed comments, but also showed forbearance to preachers-in-the-making.