

# THREE DADS IN THE SHADOWS

*A true story of missing pieces and a mighty God*

BY DEAN MERRILL

There was a lot that little Bobby Rhoden didn't know growing up.

All he knew was that he and Granny Cobb lived in a humble frame house along the railroad tracks in the dusty north Florida town of Olustee. They had a living room, a kitchen, one bedroom that the two of them shared, an outhouse, a hand pump in the back yard for water, kerosene lamps for light, and a garden.

But it was a spotlessly clean house—Granny made sure of that. And every Sunday she would take her grandson down to the nearby church, sometimes carrying an offering of home-grown vegetables or eggs from her chickens to supplement the meager tithe from their tiny government pension.

"I love you and I'll always take care of you," the bent little woman with the hair pulled back in a bun would tell Bobby, while holding him close on her lap. "Your momma—Martha Lee was what I named her—and your stepdaddy got killed back when you were only 2 years old. Got run over by a drunk driver down there along the highway while they were walking. I'll show you the spot sometime. . . . But God loves you, and I love you, and we'll make it somehow just fine."

World War II was over and the boy had started to school before he figured out what the word *stepdaddy* meant. The man who had been killed along with his mother was named Ashley Weeks—but the name Bobby wrote on his spelling papers was "Harold Robert Rhoden Jr." Where had he gotten that name?

"Well, your momma was married once before," Granny explained with sadness in her eyes. "She was awfully young, and there were problems. . . . Your dad—Harold Robert Rhoden Sr.—went and joined the Army during the war, when you were just a baby. . . . Nowadays he's off working. Maybe he'll come around sometime." And that was the end of the discussion.

Kids at school would ask Bobby, "Where's your dad?" and he, not wanting to have to clarify which one, would simply reply, "My dad died." The question seemed to come up fairly often, as if there were something behind their curiosity. Bobby didn't push matters. He wanted to fit in, to be a normal kid, to grow up in the usual way like everyone else.



Without a man in his life, Bobby learned from other kids how to play ball, and sometimes the town's older teenagers would take him fishing or to see a game at the high school. He felt very special whenever that happened, to be in the company of men.

His security was jostled at age 12, when Granny Cobb's health began to plummet. The day came that her pledge to "take care of you forever" had to be adjusted; she went to live with a daughter, while Bobby—now growing tall enough to be called "Bob"—moved in with his Aunt Inez and Uncle E.D. In this home were other boys his age, and soon they were in high school together.

## FACE TO FACE AT LAST

Then came the first shock. Bob was 15 years old when, while visiting Granny Cobb in the hospital, an uncle pulled him aside and said, "By the way, your father just happens to be here in this same hospital, up on the fourth floor, with a back problem. Let me take you up to meet him."

Young Bob was nervous as he walked into the room and saw a good-sized man sitting on the edge of the bed, with reddish hair and freckles. *What do I call him?* he wondered. *Dad? . . . Mr. Rhoden? . . . Harold?*—no, *that wouldn't be respectful.* He didn't use any name in the end; he just stuck out his hand and said, "Hello."

Harold Robert Rhoden Sr. greeted him pleasantly, and the two talked for maybe 20 minutes. Young Bob asked where he lived. "We've got a place about 30 miles out of Jacksonville," the man replied. "I've got a wife and three kids now. When summer comes along, how about if I have you come out and spend a day with us?"

Bob's heart skipped a beat. "That would be great!" he answered. Maybe he would finally get to know this man whose name he bore.

They briefly discussed Granny

Cobb's health, which was perilous, and then it seemed like there wasn't much else to talk about. Bob and his uncle wished the man a speedy recovery and left.

It was the last time Bob would ever lay eyes on the man. The phone never rang, nor did a letter ever arrive.

## LEARNING MORE

Bob Rhoden moved on toward adulthood the way he had grown up—rootless, alone, finding his own way in the world without fatherly counsel. He did come to terms with his heavenly Father, however, near the end of high school. Soon he sensed a calling to the ministry and enrolled in a Bible college. In time he met a young woman from Pennsylvania named Joan.

On their dates, they talked about family life—Joan's rich heritage of a loving dad and mom, a sister and a brother, and the contrasting vacuum in Bob's case. When they got to the stage of planning their wedding, they realized the groom's side of the sanctuary would have no relatives—only friends from college days.

Their early years together were spent at graduate school, and then they moved to start a new church in Richmond, Va., called West End Assembly of God. Joan said to her husband one day, "You know, it just feels to me like some pieces are missing in your family story. Next time we're in Florida, let's visit your aunt and try to find out more."

They did. When the question was raised, the aunt drew a long breath and then said, "Well, Bob, now that you're a grown man and married and everything . . . I should probably tell you that Harold Robert Rhoden Sr. is not your biological father after all."

The room suddenly lost all its air. "He's not?!"

Bob said in shock. "Then who is?"

She paused again, as if not wanting to dredge up unpleasant memories. "His name was Drew Strickland. He was a hired hand out at our farm, about 18 or 19 years old.

"When your mom turned up pregnant, the family was upset, of course; after all, she was only 14. Drew sort of disappeared, and Mom took little Martha Lee off to Jacksonville to live with another relative. That's where she met Harold, who felt sorry for her and also thought she was pretty. He decided he was willing to step in and give you a name. You were born 10 days shy of her 15th birthday."

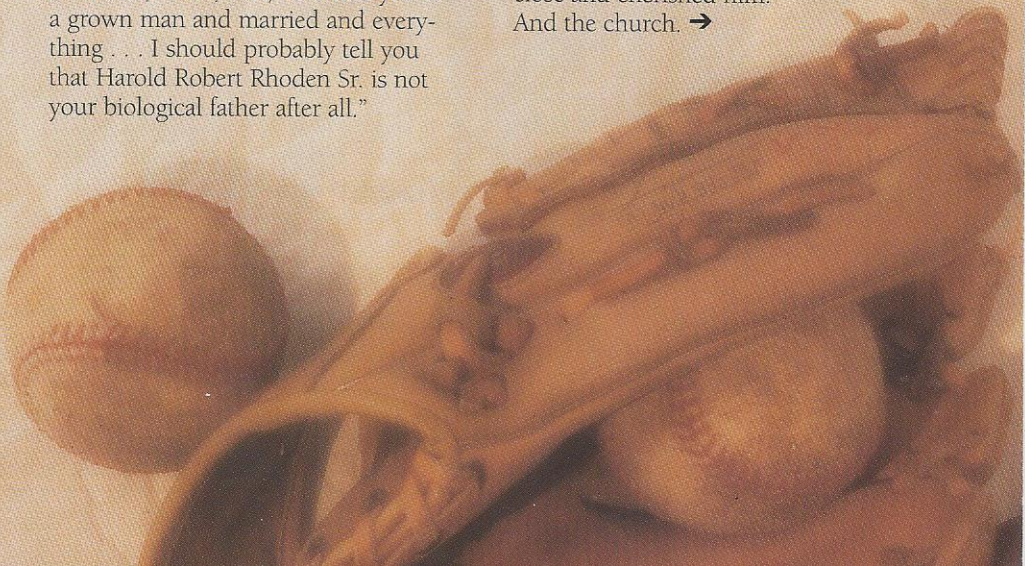
Bob and Joan could hardly speak from amazement. So that explained why Harold Rhoden hadn't followed through on his casual promise in the hospital to get better acquainted with Bob. The young teenager standing before him that day wasn't really his son after all. Harold had merely been continuing the disguise.

Presently Bob managed to ask, "Whatever happened to Drew Strickland?"

"He died around age 30, due to heart problems. You were in grade school then."

Once again, the feelings of aloneness swept in. Granny Cobb had passed away, his mother had been struck down in the road, his true father was dead. . . . Only his wife now held him close and cherished him.

And the church. →



In the months and years that followed, the whole notion of *the family of God* became ever more precious to Bob Rhoden. People related not by blood but by the blood of Christ could become some of the closest and most caring people in his life. How wonderful that God had created the fellowship of believers in a cold and fractured world.

The church in Richmond grew over the next two decades, and meanwhile, Bob and Joan welcomed two daughters and a son into their home. From his wife, Bob learned much about how to be a sensitive and reliable parent.

That caring heart was evident in his public ministry as well. When he would preach about the love of God, audiences felt a tender spirit underneath the words. In 1991 he was elected superintendent of his denomination's Potomac District. The man without a father became father to some 315 churches across Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland and the District of Columbia.

## THE CONNECTION

But the Rev. Bob Rhoden still had not fully processed the depth of his fragmented past. In the summer of 1995, a letter from his aunt arrived saying that Harold Robert Rhoden Sr. had finally passed away. Suddenly Bob was plunged into reflection.

*The man who gave me life is dead—and I don't even have a picture of him.*

*The man who gave me a name is now dead. I saw him only once.*

*And the man who gave me a future is dead.*

He and Joan traveled back to Florida, this time searching for any living relative of Drew Strickland, his birthfather. With considerable digging they found a brother. Bob placed a phone call, his hand trembling as he dialed. A man's voice answered.

"My name is Bob Rhoden, and I was wondering if maybe you could help me get a picture of my dad."

"Yes, I know about you," the voice quietly responded. "I've got some pictures, and in fact, I'd like to meet you. Could you come over to my place tomorrow?"

The next day Bob and Joan met a short, stocky man in a baseball cap who invited them into his apartment. The pictures he produced showed a face strikingly similar to Bob's. He kindly filled in various pieces of missing history.

Then Bob asked a question he had never voiced before. "Did my father ever marry?"

"Yes," the man replied. "In fact, he had three daughters before he died."

"So . . . are you saying I have three half-sisters I've never known about?"

"Yes, that's right."

In that moment, a wave of emotion swept over Bob Rhoden. For the first time in his life he felt *connected*. Here he was sitting in the living room of his real uncle, holding a faded photo of his real father and finding out he had real siblings. In some hard-to-explain fashion, he felt more like a person than in all his

53 years on earth.

Tears filled Bob's eyes as the man continued, "You know, I'm going to tell the girls about meeting you. They'd probably like to know all the rest, too."

In time contacts were made, phone calls were exchanged, and by early 1996, Bob met his three half-sisters. On Memorial Day 1996, an emotional family "reunion" occurred, with the younger generation present as

well. They filled in the blanks of their heritage with laughter, stories and tears. Close contact continues to this day.

## GOD OF THE VACANCIES

Whenever Bob Rhoden tells his story from the pulpit these days, he pauses to give thanks for a mother who gave him life even under the most awful circumstances. "Somehow she resisted abortion. And as for my missing fathers," he goes on, "I've come to see that my personal history did not have to be a trap. Though my three dads were absent, God intervened in my life through my grandmother and others to prepare me for a future. That's the kind of God He is."

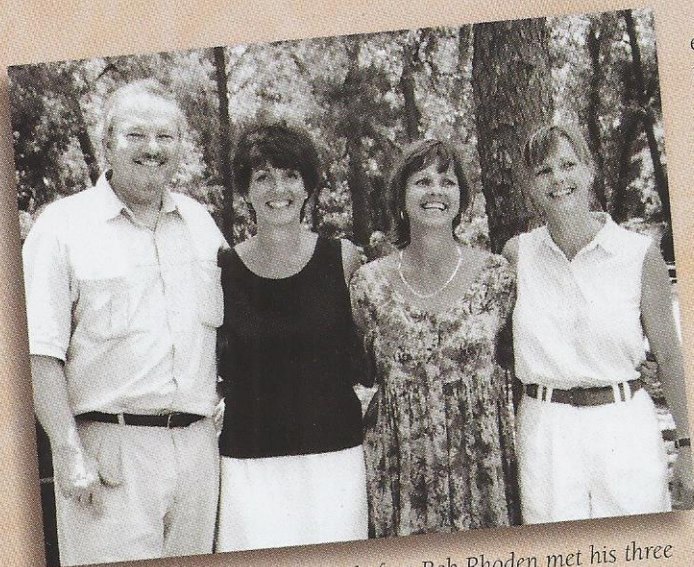
Audiences are riveted with the human drama of Bob's story and the spiritual lessons it portrays. They come up afterward with tears in their eyes to tell about missing persons in their own families. They ask questions about where to go from here, like the one woman who quietly said, "I have twins, and the man I'm married to is not their father. He knows that—but they don't. What should I do?"

Bob Rhoden kindly smiled and said, "I can't tell you what to do. But I would encourage you to be the one to open up the secret with them rather than waiting for them to find out. In this day and age of electronic databases and all the rest, they will probably get to the facts. Better for you to volunteer what happened than to be on the defensive later."

She nodded and said, "You know, I think they somehow suspect it anyway."

In a time when family structures are more shredded than ever before, when family trees have extra branches sticking out in some places and gaping holes in others, Bob Rhoden's story shows a God who is flexible and resourceful. "He often steps into our lives before we even know we need Him," Bob says. "His attention and care never stray. No matter the past, there's hope for everyone." •

*Bob Rhoden and his wife, Joan, live in Fairfax, Va. Their children are Julie, 28, Rob, 27, and Cindy, 25. Dean Merrill is vice president and publisher for the International Bible Society in Colorado Springs.*



*It took more than 50 years before Bob Rhoden met his three half-sisters (from the left): Hester, Allene and Sharon.*