

It was Dad's chance to deliver a fervent speech. Would he rise to the occasion?

Town Meeting in Grand Detour

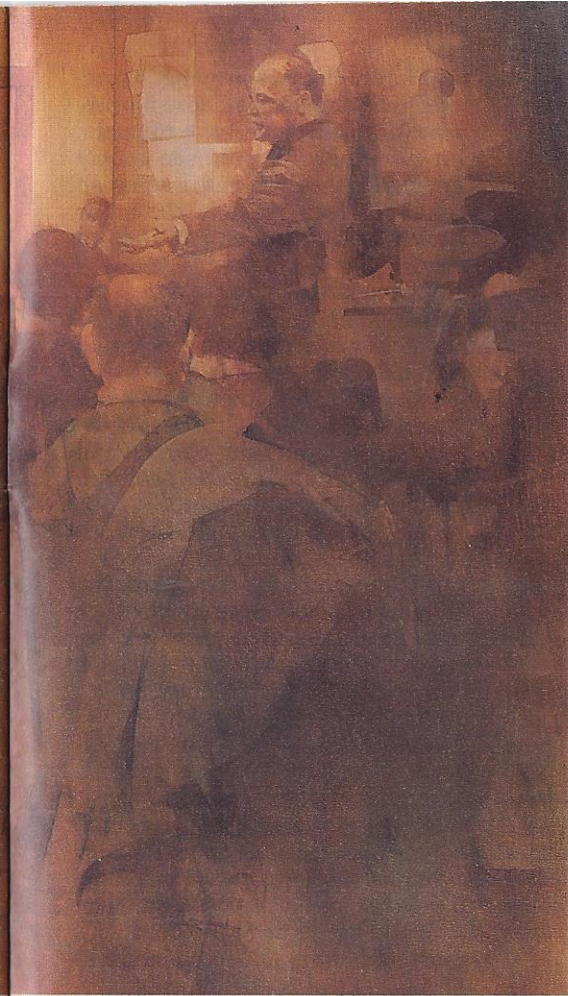
by Dean Merrill, Colorado Springs, Colorado

I was only an eight-year-old in a little northern Illinois town when I saw a spiritual truth so powerfully demonstrated that it has guided me ever since.

Dad was a minister who, you might say, came up the hard way. He supported his family by taking every job possible, from farmhand and carpenter to tool-and-die designer, meanwhile taking night courses at Bible colleges. His goal in life was to help

others find God. So by the time I was a third grader my tall, lanky father had become ordained and was pastor of the only active church in the idyllic country village of Grand Detour on the Rock River, home to maybe 300 people at best. A plainspoken man, he had a conversational way of praying in the pulpit that made you feel he and God were good friends.

We had moved into the white frame parsonage in June 1951. One of



the first things my parents did was jump into producing a large and energetic vacation Bible school. Mom, a former teacher, was the spark plug. The congregation brought their children and some of the neighbor kids to listen to Bible stories, make crafts, sing songs and memorize Scripture. This last activity was a big thing with my parents; they had us all write out the verses on three-by-five cards to keep in metal boxes so we could re-

view them and make sure they stayed firmly in our minds. Mom used to quote Psalm 119:11, "Thy word have I hid in mine heart, that I might not sin against thee."

"When you go back to school this fall," she instructed, "take your verse box with you and put it on your desk. Then if you have spare time you can go over your verses."

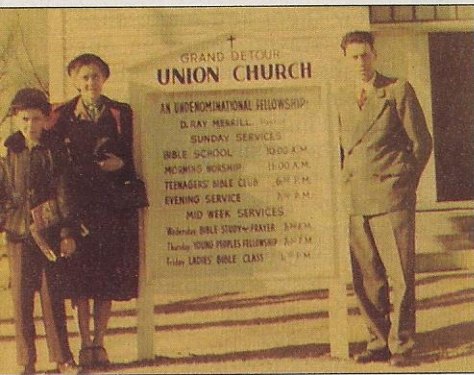
She knew how life in a two-room school such as Grand Detour's operated, having taught in similar settings herself. Each teacher had four grades to manage, so that meant a lot of study-hall minutes each day for students to complete assignments and work independently on their own projects.

But somewhere along about October I heard my folks talking in worried tones at the supper table. "Some people in town are asking why the church children are bringing Bible verses to school," Mom said. "There's been talk about it being a violation of the law." She gave Dad a worried look. "In fact, I overheard one woman in

Burgard's grocery say, 'They must be trying to push their religion onto everyone else.'"

Dad nodded gravely. "I know what you mean. I heard some of the same talk down at the Standard Oil Station, and someone told me it's quite a conversation piece at that tavern along the river."

I didn't understand what all the fuss was about, but I knew it was becoming serious when a few days later



Dean with his parents in front of the church in Grand Detour, 1953

I heard my folks talking about a town meeting. It had been scheduled to sort out whether quiet Grand Detour in bucolic Ogle County, Ill., had on its hands an impermissible breach of the separation of church and state.

Of course I wouldn't be going to the town meeting; it was for adults only. But I'll never forget that night at supper.

"I've thought long and prayed hard about whether I should attend," said Dad, his work-hardened hands gripping his coffee mug. "And if I do go, should I prepare a speech? I know some people see us as the instigators of all this trouble."

Mom stretched out her hand to Dad. "The Lord will tell you what to do."

"Well, I believe he has," Dad replied. "I feel he wants me to go to the meeting . . . but say nothing during it. After all, I'm the newcomer here."

He rose from the table, looked down at Mom and patted her shoulder. "You know, I'm just going to trust that others will speak up; I'll leave the whole thing in the hands of the Lord."

That evening our house was quiet. Mom concentrated on her mending,

but I knew she was praying. I wondered if my father would lose his pastorate and we would have to move. Out our window I could see people heading for the town hall, a squarish white building right next to our church. In fact, we rented the town hall for Sunday school space, an arrangement that stood at risk if the evening went badly.

The hours seemed to stretch on forever. When we heard voices on the road we knew the meeting had broken up.

Soon the front door opened and Dad walked in. Mom stood, letting her darned fall to the floor.

Dad took her in his arms. I listened raptly as he told what had happened.

"I slipped through the door at the last minute and took a seat in the back row. The discussion began with some tension. Several folks declared religion didn't belong in public education."

"And you?" asked Mother.

Dad smiled. "Well, I knew everyone was waiting for the new reverend to weigh in on the debate.

"But they waited in vain," continued my father. "After about an hour and a half of talking, the people came to the conclusion that the goings-on in Mrs. Malach's and Mrs. Callahan's classrooms were not so ominous after all. They agreed that as long as the youngsters with the Bible verses in those boxes kept up with their learning"—Dad shot me a meaningful glance—"and didn't bother anybody else, their freedom should be tolerated."

"Praise the Lord," exclaimed Mom. "What happened then?"

"The meeting adjourned and everyone seemed relaxed. Folks stood up and began talking about the weather and the crops. I stuck out my hand to a few people near me and

spoke for the first time. I said, 'Hi, I'm Ray Merrill. Nice to meet you.' Then, after a few minutes of socializing, I put on my hat and came home."

I had never been as proud of my father as I was that night. Even then I was old enough to know he hadn't tried to force anything. He had treated his opponents with respect. He had put into action the same fruits of the Spirit—gentleness, goodness, self-control—that he preached from the pulpit. And in so doing, God's Word had been allowed its liberty.

In later years I wondered, What if the town meeting had concluded that the Bible-verse boxes were forbidden?

I knew exactly what would have happened. No phone calls would have gone to attorneys. No petitions would have been circulated. No boycott efforts would have been launched. Instead, my parents and the Sunday school teachers would simply have gathered us kids around them and said, "Now do you see why we memorize the Word of God? We put it deep within our hearts and minds, where no one can take it from us. That's the whole point. If you have God's truth within you, you're prepared no matter what the circumstances." We would have been winners either way. ◀