

## On the Sidewalks of New York

### 22. The Summer of 1950

Finances were still an issue when I got to Union Seminary. I had been able to get through Wooster by working on campus and getting employment during the summer. Even those sources of income were not enough to pay the bills. In my last two years at Wooster, I had been fortunate to have the scholarship provided by Fred and Margaret Mohr which helped with tuition expenses. Now I had to make it through Union.

One road I would not take was to borrow money. It made me uneasy to have any debts. This was deeply ingrained in me. My mother had operated on the principle that if you don't have the money, then you saved until you could afford what you wanted. I had saved enough to pay my initial tuition at Union. I was also able to get work in the refectory to cover food expenses. The other source of income, largely for spending money, was from the field work which was required for incoming students.

The field work program served several purposes. For some of us it provided a small source of income from the churches or the institutions where you were assigned. Its main purpose was to prepare those entering pastoral ministry with experience in a local congregation. Union was ideally located for tapping into a wide range of church experiences. There were not only the vast array of metropolitan New York congregations, but also the suburban congregations in New Jersey and Long Island. The field for employment was wider than work in local congregations. There was also the possibility of assignment to projects related to offices within the Federal Council of Churches, which was soon to become the National Council of Churches. Or there was work within the denominational offices. Pastoral counselling was just getting underway so there were openings for training in chaplaincy programs within the hospitals in the city.

When I arrived at Union my future course in ministry was still not clear. I had originally begun college with the intention of preparing for a radio

ministry overseas. My politicization at Wooster had moved me in a different direction. I now considered work in the United States in some area of social or pastoral ministry. But I did not have a specific focus. Since field work was required, I decided to look over the field of possible church assignments.

Arthur Swift, who taught in the area of Church and Community and was head of the field work office, immediately suggested that I work at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church. "It's your home church and you know the people. It would be good for them to have one of their own sons back as a seminary intern." My response was quick: "That's just the problem. I know Madison Avenue too well. I want to work in an area where I have not had experience."

"If that's the case, then perhaps you would like to work in one of the Presbyterian congregations in New Jersey." Swift suggested. After going down the list of New Jersey congregations, he made an appointment for me with Bill Kroll, the pastor of the Arlington Avenue Presbyterian Church in East Orange. My interview at the East Orange church was positive. Bill Kroll was an affable person who immediately made me feel at home. He decided after our conversation that he would take me on as a field work student for their Sunday youth program.

The Arlington Avenue Church was a suburban congregation of 900 members with a large youth group. My assignment was to teach in the Church School on Sunday morning and work with the Youth Fellowship in the evening. I would be working with the congregation's Christian educator, a pleasant woman of Quaker background. After my initial meeting at Arlington Church I decided that Bill Kroll was a reconstructed liberal with an open approach to the problems of American society.

I quickly recognized that the suburban church was not my particular bent. Teaching junior and senior high suburban youth was not in my frame of reference. This was like meeting some of my Wooster classmates in their junior and senior high school years. We met in the church lounge where the sofa and easy chairs made it difficult to keep young people focussed. The Sunday evening program was more to my liking. The Christian educator,

with her Friends orientation, was eager to explore world issues. She was happy with my political point of view, so our brain-storming session on future programs was productive. We began with several programs on atomic energy and then followed with a program on Russian-American relations. She pressed for a series on comparative world religions: Buddhism, Hinduism and Islam. I suggested a Union Seminary contact for the program on Hinduism. John Bathgate had returned to Union from his "Wooster in India" stint at Allahabad Agricultural Institute and so I invited him to Arlington Avenue Church. John had an easy style and was an instant hit. He fascinated the young people with his stories about living in another culture and illustrated his integration into India with an excellent series of slides. We followed John's presentation with Stanley Samatha, a graduate student at Union from South India, who gave an close-up look at the impact of Hinduism on the customs of India.

The most intriguing session of the comparative religion series was a visit to a black Muslim worship center in inner-city Newark. This was my first return to Newark after my visits to the Rehlings with my mother in the 1930's. This was a different Newark than I had visited as a youngster. We drove into a run-down section of the city. The mosque was in an area abandoned by the white population leaving for the suburbs. The visit was dramatic. There was an undercurrent of uneasiness among our young people. Most had never been in downtown Newark, especially in a black area.

Black Muslims were gathering steam in 1950. The worship was a fascinating mixture of confession of faith to Islam and strains of music and practice drawn largely from the black Christian tradition. The music was played on a stringed Middle Eastern instrument held in the lap. The imam recited from the Koran with deep conviction and the whole congregation responded with words that affirmed their ancestry to Ishmael. In their recitation of the Muslim faith, the congregation disclaimed their being "Negro, colored or black."

I wrote in my notes after this venture in 1950: " It was the congregation's way of attempting to escape the ignominious fate of the man (sic) who is born black in America's "democratic" society. I am not disputing the religious

belief or the integrity of thought which the people manifested in their worship, but I recognize that the situation was fraught with psychological tensions which could have been caused by our presence." I am sure that this experience in inner-city Newark lasted our young people a life time.

As much as I enjoyed the people of Arlington Avenue Church, the field work experience left a lot to be desired. In the early Spring of 1950 I began exploring how I would spend my summer. It needed to be both an expanding of my experience and a means to help pay my next year at Union. As summer got closer, I got more anxious. One evening Bob Stone, a Presbyterian minister working in student ministry, showed up on the sixth floor of Hastings Hall. He had a summer job proposal. He came by my room specifically. "Someone said I should talk to you about this summer." he said.

"I'm all ears. What have you got?" I asked. "I've got a program for working in the steel mills in Pittsburgh," Stone replied.

"You gotta be kidding," I snapped back. "Come on in and let's talk. What's this got to do with seminarians?"

"You probably haven't heard of the Presbyterian Institute of Industrial Relations. It's call PIIR for short. PIIR's offices are down in the Labor Temple on 14th Street and Second Avenue."

I remembered Labor Temple from my younger days. One summer my mother took me down to Labor Temple to enroll in a summer program the Presbytery of New York was sponsoring at Camp Sharparoon. "Tell me more," I told Bob Stone.

"The Institute has been at the Labor Temple for the last five years running a program preparing ministers for ministry in industrial and urban areas in the country. It's been highly successful. Marshal Scott, who runs the program, wants to begin a new program for seminarians. He wants to catch them before they go out into their ministries. Marshal's setting up a program this summer to employ seminarians in industrial jobs in Pittsburgh. He's got it set up so there would be evening seminars for the seminarians to discuss the

experiences they are having in their jobs on the line. The program is called 'Ministers-in-Industry'."

"Where will the seminarians live if they're working all over Pittsburgh?"

"Marshal has arranged for rooms at two of the Presbyterian Seminaries - at Western the Presbyterian Seminary and at Pitt-Xenia, the United Presbyterian Seminary."

It didn't take me long to decide. "Sign me up," I told Bob Stone. It had all the possibilities of being an exceptional summer. There was not only the chance to work in the steel industry, but also to explore what an industrial ministry might look like in the Presbyterian Church. Besides, I thought, a summer in steel should help with next year's tuition bill.

As soon as classes finished at Union, I headed for Pittsburgh and for Pitt-Xenia Seminary where the project was to be housed for the first half of the summer. Eighteen seminarians had signed up for the program. Marshal Scott was late for our first meeting. When he showed up he appeared uneasy. He was a man of slight build, balding, with a Midwestern twang.

After his initial anxiousness, he hit his stride. He warmed up to tell us what a great summer this was going to be. I learned later that he had had difficulty getting Western Seminary to house us. The seminary administration had little confidence that the program would last out the summer. Marshal had, in fact, gone to Pitt-Xenia to make arrangements to house us for the first half of the summer. Western Seminary didn't expect the program would get through to the second half. So from the beginning there were some doubts about the philosophy and the practicality of the program.

Marshal explained to us that he had been on the phone up to the last minute confirming jobs for us. He began by telling us that at first he had considered letting us find our own jobs. Then some of the union leaders and the corporate heads told him that would only delay the program. Since most of us were unfamiliar with Pittsburgh it would take time to locate jobs. So

Marshal made the initial job contacts and we then followed up for the job interview.

Marshal also made it clear that all of the job contacts were informed that we were to be hired on as any other job applicant. No one was to know that we were seminarians. Only those in the personnel or employment office would have this information. If there was any suspicion on the shop floor about our identity, we could tell our fellow workers we were students taking summer jobs.

We were getting our first taste of reality of the status the church had in the industrial situation. If the workers knew that we were preachers-in-the-making our relationships would be skewed. They would put us in a separate category and make exceptions for us. We would get the easiest work. They would watch their language. They would not be themselves. It would change the whole context of the work situation.

The fact that we were not to identify ourselves was fine by all of us. Everyone accepted their role in the summer's experience. There were eighteen of us in the program. Three of our number had not yet arrived at our opening session on June 6th. We were to be the first in a long line of seminarians to take part in similar summer experiences over the next thirty years. Little did I know in the Summer of 1950 that I would be running the program in 1972 as the last Dean of the PIIR. The program would finally come to an end in 1975.

Of the eighteen gathered in 1950, seven were from Princeton Seminary, six were from Union Seminary, three were from Yale, one from McCormick Seminary and one from San Francisco Theological Seminary. There were none from Western Seminary in Pittsburgh where the program was being held. Louis Hensley from San Francisco Theological Seminary was the only African American in the program. Bob Batchelder from Yale was the lone non-Presbyterian, a Congregationalist. All but one of us, John Holden, were to get jobs in manufacturing industries. The majority of us were hired on for steel jobs.

On a Monday morning in early June, Don Mathews, a 1950 graduate from Union Seminary, and I showed up at the Carnegie-Illinois employment offices in Braddock, Pennsylvania. This was another name for U.S. Steel. We filled out the jobs applications at the office. We waited for the word, knowing that there was probably a memo in the office approving our application. I didn't feel bad since I recognized that there were other students being hired for summer work.

Don and I were hired on at the Edgar Thompson Works in Braddock. Don was to work in the open hearth. I was assigned to the splice bar shop. The Carnegie Illinois operation took up a lot of territory. The open hearth operation was far removed from the splice bar shop so Don got off at a different stop several blocks down on the street car line.

It was a long street car ride from the north side of Pittsburgh to Braddock every day. Don and I rarely rode out to Braddock together since we were usually on different work shifts. I made my lunch at night so I could get a quick start in the morning. At the hour I started out my mind glazed over as the street car rumbled through an awakening city, across the Allegheny River, followed the meandering Monongahela and then through miles of steel valley scenery. We passed Homestead on the other side of the river. A flashback on labor history reminded me of the hard fought steel strike at Homestead in 1892. It was one of the most savagely fought labor-capital battles in steel industry history. The craft union at Homestead was completely shattered by the forces assembled by Andrew Carnegie and out of the struggle came a popular labor song, "Father was Killed by the Pinkerton Men."

Even with their distinct history the steel towns looked alike, made grey and somber by the years of accumulated soot and grime from the mills. Stacked up along the valley wall were the houses, row upon row, of those who made their living from steel or businesses associated with the industry. Along the valley floor were the mills with their smoke stacks belching out their dark billows of gas and soot. Behind the chain linked fences were the miles of prefabricated G.I. sheds out of which one could catch glimpses of the red hot steel being rolled or strung out. The one thing different were the stores and

shops in the towns, many of which still carried the names and the cultural nuances of the immigrant ethnic groups who had helped make the history of the steel community.

I got down at my stop, crossed the street, walked past the guard at the gate, and punched in at the splice bar shop of the Edgar Thompson Works. I threw my lunch in my locker and waited to hear my assignment from the foreman. The splice bar shop was housed in an enormous high roofed shed. Alongside one inside wall of the shed were railroad tracks on which waited the open flat beds which were to collect the product of our labor. The splice bar, of which I had never heard before coming to the Edgar Thompson Work, is the steel bar which joins two rails together.

The splice bar production lines ran the width of the shed. At one end were the furnaces where the splice bars were heated white hot. In front of each open furnace a worker sat in a small cart from which extended an elongated steel rod with prongs at the end. The worker would operate the car in a backward and a forward motion with the prong extended into the white hot furnace, at the proper moment pushing the white hot splice bars out of an opening on the other side of the furnace onto a moving chain belt. The belt carried the splice bar to a huge machine press where another worker would position the splice bar with a pair of tongs onto the press and at the same time push a button bringing down the shaper onto the splice bar. In another motion, the press operator pushed the stamped bar out onto another chain belt which moved the bar down into and through a long vat of oil. The cooled down bar, this was a relative term, came out from the vat at the other end into a catch trough where another worker, protected by a leather apron and leather hand pads, loaded each bar onto a pallet. After the pallet was filled, an overhead crane would lift the load into the open flat bed cars which waited at the end of the line.

During the summer I worked at two of these positions, at the press and as a loader at the end of the process. The press was a hot job. The bar had just come out of the furnace. You felt the heat even though you were at the other end of the tongs. You had to be quick and careful to position the bar onto the press. The loader's job was not as hot, since the bars were relatively cooled

down after they came out of the oil bath. The job was dirty. The leather flaps strapped to your hands were quickly soaked with hot oil from lifting the two foot dripping bars. After a day as a loader you felt well-lubricated. You also knew where all your back, arm and shoulder muscles were.

Working on the line I learned quickly about worker solidarity. The speed at which the line moved was determined by the front man, the operator of the motorized cart who pushed the bars out of the oven onto the chain belt. The furnace man developed a pace in tune with the rest of the workers on the line. He knew the speed at which some of the old timers could move.

One day a husky college student replaced the black worker who was the regular man on the cart. As soon as he learned the job, the student began picking up the pace. He pushed the bars out of the oven at an increasing speed. The man on the press machine had to move with much haste. The bars began piling up on the belt. I was loading that day and had to jump to keep the bars from overflowing the trough. The press operator shouted back angry words at the student. He slowed down momentarily to allow the line to catch up.

The next day the student was back on the cart. He began slow but had begun to accelerate his pace when the shop superintendent showed up. The superintendent had taken notice of the increased production on our line recorded on yesterday's production board. The oven operators were those who kept score of the splice bars after each heating up of the furnace. Our line had outstripped the normal schedule for splice bar production. The shop superintendent came by early to watch the student do his job at the furnace. He congratulated him on his record-breaking pace. We again began running to keep up with the bars coming out of the furnace.

At break time, our line gathered outside the shed for coffee. Conversation quickly turned to the work of our college student oven operator.

"The superintendent really likes your work," one of the line men sarcastically commented to our college line-backer.

"Yeah, he was pretty eager when he saw yesterday's production record." another man chimed in.

"How long you gonna be working here?" asked the first man.

"I'm only working this summer. I go back to school in the Fall." the college line-backer replied.

"We're gonna be working here after this Fall. We're gonna be working here the rest of our lives," the second man shot back.

"So let's cool it on this balls-breakin' pace," the first man said caustically. "Stop pushin' those things out so fast. You're only here this summer. We gotta a lifetime of this shit."

There were no more records broken on the splice bar line that summer. Everything returned to normal after the college line-backer's first day on the job.