

*Chapter Two*

*Pinky's Nose*

“When you see a nose coming around the corner, you know that Pinky is sure to follow.”

My father's dad, Aaron Pinkney (“Pinky” as a child, but A. P. later) Elliff, did have a substantial schnozzola. Some of us got the gene for it. But then, I would take all of my grandfather Elliff's genes if I could.

Born in 1887, he never lost his desire to sniff out the facts. He was born a student. When he died at 93 he was preparing three Bible lessons a week. He taught school in various venues in Arkansas, as well as in Oklahoma where he trained prep school students at the academy for the Oklahoma Baptist College in Shawnee. He taught math and music, among other disciplines. In every town he also started an “um-pah” band with whatever instruments could be mustered for the cause (with my dad on the sax). His school teaching helped put bread on the table, but his first vocation was preaching. He was the pastor of several small churches, mainly in Arkansas.

His preaching may have had too many Bible references in it for our day, but he was always doctrinal, alert, and prepared. He worked at it faithfully. In his last years he rigged the kitchen table up with a two-level bookshelf on one end so that after the dishes were cleared away he could do the important work of his life, study to teach. “You haven’t taught them until they’ve learned,” he used to tell us.

When I pastored Indian Hills Baptist Church in North Little Rock, Arkansas, in the seventies, rumors were floating around that I dared to preach without a pulpit. Those rumors were true, and it was certainly novel at the time. In fact, I used an overhead projector also—really cutting edge stuff. When Grandfather Elliff heard about it he cut short the comments of the Pharisaical inquirer by stating that a pulpit was only a stand to put your Bible on and was not necessary. And, since he often used visual aids, such as chalk drawings or a blackboard in his teaching, he thought my use of the overhead was almost ideal. Pretty liberated for a man in his eighties at the time.

A. P. graduated from Ouachita Baptist College, the college from which I would eventually graduate also. A. P. began in 1904, but did not graduate until 1916. He was at the vanguard of over a hundred years of Elliffs attending Ouachita. Later he received his BS from Shawnee, and an honorary doctorate from Ouachita. His undergraduate studies took place during the years when men and women lined up separately to walk to church. A. P. married Sue Bishop from Arkadelphia, where the college was located. Eventually he was ordained at the Second Baptist Church there, which at the time was called Sweet Hill Baptist.

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Sue Elliff was all love and evangelism. She hugged me when I was a boy in such a way that you had to gasp for air. On the wall in the kitchen you could see her prayer list, with names of local merchants, filling station attendants, neighborhood ladies and children who were unconverted. She was made to tell people about Christ. My father never remembered her praying without mentioning someone by name who needed Christ, with tears. When the table prayer was completed before the meal she would always clap her hands coinciding with the word "bless." "BLESS (clap) the Lord, Oh my soul, and all that is within me." Like Goliath's sword, there was none like her.

One steamy summer night, when A. P. was out, she heard a knock at the back screen door. A hobo who had jumped off the train was asking for some food. She told him to wait there until she returned. In the kitchen she pulled out the cheese from the icebox. Taking the butcher knife she cut off a good plug of cheese. Then, with the butcher knife in one hand and the cheese in the other, she made her way across the kitchen to the living room, thinking all the time about how she would present Christ to this unconverted soul. When she reached the screen door, without being conscious of what she was saying, she shook the knife in his face and said, "Are you prepared to meet the Lord?" The tramp turned and ran! Some say he outran the train, but surely that part of the story is apocryphal.

It was the Bishop side that brought worry into the clan. With all of her wonderful traits, Grandmother Elliff was a master at worry. Her sister, whom we saw only at Christmas, was such a worrier that to me she seemed to have "the nerves." But in reality, she was perhaps only shy and skittish by

personality. Sue infected my dad with her imagination for the worst. And that was passed down to me. I think (though it is not fully tested) that I'm a bit better at shunning the worry habit than my father, and he was certainly improved over his mother, but it is there nonetheless. I've had to work against it all my life.

Granddad Elliff was an expert at making things out of wood. His shop, separate from the house, was a treasure chest of strange tools and assortments of wood. It was here that he made for each of us a beautiful platform rocker to give to us upon our marriage. However, because I went so long without getting married, he had to give mine to me early, for fear that he would die before I would ever enter into matrimonial bliss. He and I made some things together in his shop. Time with him was special, and he was a careful teacher. Sadly, I didn't carry on with woodworking, though my father was also an exceptional furniture maker. A. P.'s furniture was always substantial and utilitarian, made to last for a millennium, but Dad's work was finished well for beauty as well as function.

Do you ever wonder how the gospel came to your family? Perhaps you are the first one to respond to Christ in all of your extended family. From all appearances, salvation did not come to my family until the late 1800s, when it came through my great-grandfather who, like my father, was named James Thomas Elliff. Actually it came through his wife, a young Tennessee woman.

As a young man, James Thomas brought his bride to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) to purchase some property for farming. After he had farmed for a while, his wife got desperately ill and longed to return to Tennessee to be cared for. He sold

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the land and loaded his wife and baby girl on the train for the long ride. However, somewhere outside of Little Rock, Arkansas, his wife passed away.

Before his wife died, this frail Christian woman pled with her husband to come to Christ and to raise their little girl in the fear of the Lord. The girl was put under the care of another woman for the remainder of the trip. James got on his knees and did not get up for a long time. When he rose, he was a believer in Christ. That following Sunday he told his story to the church, with the baby girl in his arms. He became a fine believer, and a deacon of the church there. Eventually he remarried and had several children. One of those became a preacher—my grandfather.

My father, the only son of my grandfather Elliff, also became a preacher. His three boys (my brothers and I) became preachers, and the daughter Sandy married a preacher. Now, in the fourth generation, there are altogether fourteen who are in vocational Christian work at present, with others promising to follow.

Do you think that the sickly Tennessee wife knew all that would transpire from her plea?

On one occasion, A. P. was preaching in a brush arbor meeting in Oklahoma. Even though the meeting was intended to be evangelistic, he had determined to preach to believers only with the theme, “When Zion travails she brings forth many children.” But there were some detractors from a previous meeting who were determined to cause trouble for A. P. This gang of young people conspired to ruin the meeting by driving up in their automobiles so as to cause

such a distraction that the meeting could not go on. A. P. got wind of this. Calling the Anti Horse Thief League men together, they concocted a way to stop the gang by digging a ditch around the meeting place to keep the cars from getting close. That part worked well. Not to be discouraged, the gang of boys attempted to come in to the meeting on foot. But when they did, certain men were ready for them. They took them aside, peeling them off from each other, and talked to them about Christ. Before it was over, several of these young men had to come to Christ as their Master.

When A. P. was called to pastor in Lavaca, Arkansas in 1921, the river was overflowing to such an extent that the family could not cross. Soon however, the ferry could cross again, and the young family of four began their work. A. P. wished to hold a protracted meeting at the beginning of his ministry there. He removed the window sashes so that the air could flow better, and turned the pews, arranging the pulpit on the side. As crowds grew, families on wagons would pull up to the open windows because the church building was packed. This meeting became one of the most notable in Arkansas' history, and is recorded in a book on revival written by Dr. Mark Coppenger.

During that meeting, 108 people were converted and were baptized in the Vache Grass Creek in 63 minutes (thanks to A. P.'s organizational skills). Others joined who were believers as well. The welcome line led from the door of the church building all the way to the street. To this day, the Lavaca church is a major influence in that area of Arkansas.

When my father was 89, his children took him to several places related to his growing up. It was a memorable trip.

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The last stop was at the Vache Grass Creek. We tried to relive the experience of 83 years earlier. With tears we sang old hymns by the creek that may have been sung during that baptism, and all prayed that God would make us faithful to preach the word just as A. P. Elliff had been. I will never be able to forget that experience by the creek, nor will I ever want to forget its message to me.

When A. P. preached his first sermon, he did very poorly, and the church people generally tried to be encouraging to the young preacher. But brother Loudermilk, the church's outspoken deacon, shook A. P.'s hand saying, "Son, don't preach until you have to." When the old deacon hobbled away, young A. P. heard him whisper to someone close by, "He'll never make it."

My grandfather then and there resolved to prove Mr. Loudermilk wrong. After 75 years of preaching, he succeeded, faithful to the end.

I want to do the same.