

CAMP PITCH

Helen rolled down the backseat window and stuck her head out.

“You’re in tent one,” Elder Mershon from the Locating Committee told Mom. “We’re all glad you came early.”

“That is just the spot I wanted,” Mom said. “Now I can run to my tent to change and freshen up before I open the serving line in the cafeteria.”

Mom was the camp meeting cook. And this was the week of camp pitch when only the pastors and their families were on the campground.

Mom pulled the car in beside the first row of tents. Helen and Lyle jumped out and raced to the flagpole then around to the sandy circles where the children’s tents were last year. They made a swift dash around the middle ground to see which of the preachers’ wives were set up in the cabins. Of course, only those with little babies could stay there once camp meeting began. Some very old people could stay in cabins where wind and rain wouldn’t bother them.

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But none of the preachers were that old.

Mom was pulling a box of sheets and blankets from the trunk of the car when Helen and Lyle got back to tent one. They helped her with the big box.

"Here," she said. "Go fill your straw ticks. Helen, your cot is across from mine. Lyle, yours will be our sofa in the front room."

Mom was hanging up a white sheet for a partition between the two halves of the tent.

"Look at this," Lyle said. "We have floor in both rooms this year."

Helen remembered that the year before some of their things had gotten wet when a big rain sent a little river through their tent. She pulled the string from the lightbulb over the little table in the front room. There was electricity already.

They grabbed the bags that looked like bed-sized pillowcases with buttons on one end. They ran to the straw tent almost at the middle of the tent section and stuffed each bag full. It took two of them to carry each filled mattress back to tent one. Mom put each mattress on a bed and made up the bed while they went back for the other straw tick.

"I'll finish here later," Mom told Helen. "Let's go see the kitchen."

It was only across the sandy driveway to the back door of the kitchen. The screen door banged behind them. Elder Kirk set down a two-gallon pitcher. He was stirring the cold drink for the preachers in a ten-gallon kettle set on a knee-high stool. He poured Helen a glass half full.

It was red. *Cherry or strawberry?*

"How's this?" the elder asked.

Helen took a big swallow. *Strawberry!*

"More ice," she said.

Elder Kirk grinned. "Get me some." He handed her a shallow

pan. He was humming and tapping his toe in rhythm. He was very young and very black. They were old friends.

Helen took off for the cooler, belting out the words to “Precious Lord, Take My Hand,” Elder Kirk’s song. The black preacher was singing with her:

*“Through the storm, through the night,
Lead me on to the light.
Take my hand, precious Lord,
Lead me home.”*

Mom lit one big gas burner then turned it off. “Good,” she said. “I was afraid we might have to wait until afternoon for the gas to be turned on.”

Helen pulled hard to open the door of the walk-in icebox. It was as big as the back of a pickup truck. She closed the door quickly so none of the cold could get out. The tiny lightbulb over her head shone on two crates of head lettuce, a tall can that said “Anoka Dairy” on the side, two crates with quart jars of milk, a big box labeled “Eggs,” two watermelons, ten cantaloupes, a lumpy orange cloth sack of carrots, a dozen big blocks of ice slowly melting and dripping, and a pan filled with small chunks of ice. She took one piece of ice the size of a dinner plate and went out, closing the door carefully, making certain the latch clicked.

Mom was examining the hundreds of boxes stacked almost to the ceiling in half of the big kitchen. In her left hand she held the notebook with her food orders. She checked off each item as she found it. “This should do,” she said.

Elder Woods was standing on a stepladder pulling a wire that hung over the pipes and trusses under the ceiling. “I’m connecting a line to the big tent so your kitchen workers can hear all the programs on the loud speaker while you prepare our food,” he told Mom.

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"That's good," Mom said. "We have some wonderful preachers on the schedule this year. I always feel bad about missing those messages and the music."

Leonard Burgeson, the man of all helps in the kitchen, was carrying big wire baskets of plates and bowls from the dish room to the deep-dish sinks. "I want all the dishes washed and sterilized today," he said.

"That's a good idea," Mom said. "We'll need some teenage boys to put all these canned foods in the storeroom. I'm going to run across the street and say Hello to Lawrence and Myra."

Helen tagged along. Lawrence Burgeson was Leonard Burgeson's brother, and he lived at the campground all year long and took care of everything. Myra was his wife. Mom had helped Mrs. Burgeson cook before she took over the job herself. They were old, old friends. Now they had a big visit.

When Helen and Mom got back to the kitchen, Mom started pulling big pots from under the work counter. "Please wash these too," she told Leonard Burgeson. She filled a small sink with hot water and dropped in big spoons and paddles and mashers. "Wash these," she told Helen.

Helen brought a stool and began washing. When she finished, she went outdoors to find boys and girls from preachers' families. Most of them were friends from last year. Vickie and her brother introduced Lona, whose father was the new pastor in the Wadena district.

"We're from Oregon," Lona said.

The big camp bell began to ring. Joe Carlson, the bell ringer, shouted to the children. "Go wash your hands for dinner!"*

The cafeteria food deck was not set up for camp pitch. All the preachers and their families sat at a few tables near the kitchen, and

* *Dinner* was the noon meal for the people of Minnesota at this time. The evening meal was *supper*.

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Mom and Leonard Burgeson brought large bowls of mashed potatoes and gravy, platters of Choplets, bowls of green beans, and plates of bread and butter to each table. Helen sat with Elder Kirk's wife and little girl. Soon Elder Kirk came with a pitcher of cherry-flavored drink. After the meal, older children watched the little children, and all the mothers helped clean up the dining room and wash dishes. Then the mothers took all the little children to their tents or cabins for naps, while Helen went with Vickie and Lona to play and watch the preachers put up the Primary tent. That would be her tent this year.

The men unrolled the big brown canvas tent where it would stand. A preacher on a tractor helped them raise three poles and set them in holes in the ground. With ropes and pulleys, they pulled up the tent until its peak was high at the middle pole. With more ropes they brought up both ends of the tent. Finally, they went around the outside and drove in pegs in a circle and secured the sides to the ground.

"Stand back," Elder Voyles warned Lyle and four other boys who were eager to get inside and look up at the high roof.

When the whole Primary tent was safely set up, the preachers allowed the children to go inside to play in the empty space while they set up the Cradle Roll and Kindergarten tents. Later, everybody went to watch the Junior tent go up. It was much bigger.

Monday morning all the preachers and their families gathered in the cafeteria for worship before breakfast. Nobody had a songbook, but Elder Olson led everyone in singing. He was a very old man, very thin and very tall, with a very big smile.

*"What says the Bible, the blessed Bible?
This should my only question be;
Teachings of men so often mislead us—
What says the book of God to me?"*

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Helen forgot the first line of the chorus, but she joined in:

*“What says the Bible? Study it well.
Keep the commandments, the ten commandments,
Look for the coming Savior too.”*

After breakfast, the Scandinavian tent went up. The tent was flat on the ground. The poles were in place, and the preacher on the tractor was backing off. Helen came to stand beside Elder Colson. “How come we have a Scandinavian tent?” she asked.

“It’s sometimes hard for older people to learn a new language,” the elder said. “Minnesota has hundreds of Adventists who like to listen to Swedish or Norwegian or Danish preaching. They would rather sing and pray in those languages too.” Helen knew he was a Swede, so he ought to know.

“But God isn’t a Swede,” she objected.

“Don’t worry. God understands English,” Elder Colson assured her. “But many of our old Adventists don’t.”

“My grandpa understands German,” Helen told him. “He sings in German too.”

“I’ve heard him,” said Elder Colson. He looked at Elder Anderson, who was waiting for the crew leader to give the next command. “Aren’t you glad, Brother, that we all have the Word of God in our favorite language so we can understand what pleases God?”

Elder Olson was a Swede too. He raised his snow-white eyebrows like a signal, and Elder Colson began singing with him. Elder Emmerson, who was a Dane, joined in.

*“Searching the Scriptures, the blessed Scriptures,
Seeking the Saviour day by day,
Striving to learn the wondrous story,*

What does the blessed Bible say?

Go and inquire, the king commandeth,

Go and inquire [Elder Emmerson's bass boomed an echo.]

Ask of the Lord for me and thee;

Ask of the Lord [Helen dropped her chin to her chest and tried to growl the bass echo with Elder Emmerson.]

Knock at the open door of mercy

Knock at the open [Helen grinned at Elder Colson, who joined the strong echo.]

Where there is pardon full and free."

"Can you sing that in Swedish?" Helen asked.

"Let me think a bit," Elder Colson said with a little twitch of a smile.

"It's the same song, you know," Helen said.

"What?" Elder Colson said. "I didn't follow that rabbit trail."

Helen began singing, "What says the Bible, the blessed Bible?"

"You're right!" Elder Colson agreed. "Even the tune is similar."

Helen wondered why there wasn't a German tent, even though Minnesota had lots of German Adventists. Maybe the Germans just liked English.

She asked Mom that night while she pulled on her pajamas.

"The Germans have been in America for two or three or four generations," Mom explained. "My grandparents were born in Austria, but your grandpa was born right here in St. Paul, Minnesota, and learned English in school when he was a little boy."

Helen was curious. Grandpa Steiner hadn't told her that story. She would ask him to.

Tuesday the big tent went up. It was bigger than the biggest circus tent Helen had ever seen. All the children knew to stay way back and be still while the workmen stretched the canvas and brought in the many poles, each taller than electric poles along the

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highway. Every elder belonged to a special crew. Each crew leader gave each man a special task. Then everybody did just what he was told the instant the command went out.

The big tent rose little by little until it stood billowing in the afternoon breeze. Preachers scurried around the edges driving pegs and tying down the walls. When they were finished, everyone went inside to look up in wonder at the high canvas ceiling with sunlight making it as golden as a ripe wheat field.

Wednesday the children had to stay away from the road between the storage building and the big tent, for trucks went back and forth with loads of folding chairs. Men and teenage boys worked all day setting up chairs in sections marked off with white chalk, like a baseball field. Each section of chairs had a number. During camp meeting, a deacon would be in charge of that section, keeping the chairs in order, picking up any papers people had dropped, and taking offerings during meetings.

“Everything must be done in good order,” Elder Nordstrom told the children. “Just as God commanded Moses to have everything about the tabernacle done just so, He wants us to make camp meeting a holy time for His people.” Elder Nordstrom was born in Norway. He often said so.

The children sat down on a row of chairs near the front while the platform was put in place and chairs set up on it. After a while, they went outside to check on work in other areas. A farm truck was unloading straw to three more tents located in different parts of camp. A produce truck was backed up to the kitchen door, and three teenage boys were lugging in dozens of watermelons.

Vickie’s mom and two other preachers’ wives were cleaning the Dorcas building so it would be ready on Thursday for the many Dorcas Societies to set up their needlework for people to buy. The money would be used for missionary work. Mr. and Mrs. Foss were filling the shelves and tables in the Book and Bible House. The

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camp nurse had two rooms sparkling clean and ready for sick or injured people who might need her care during the following ten days.