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Bushy Beards and Shawls

Spiritual giants are as rare as physical ones, and much of what they are is the product of generations of greatness. It was out of the crucible of persecution and privation that Paul Bartel's life was shaped and prepared for great exploits in a land torn by decades of strife and conflict.

His story begins in 1874 when a band of fifty stalwart Mennonites arrived in the frontier town of Hillsboro, Kansas, seeking freedom from religious persecution. The arrival of this group of immigrants from Poland caused quite a stir in that area. These strangers were different, and they soon became the butt of crude jokes and smirks from the townspeople. These bushy-bearded Mennonites from "Polish Russia" wore wide-brimmed felt hats and baggy trousers. The women, in shawls and voluminous flapping skirts, were objects of scorn and ridicule. These newcomers, who wrapped their feet in cloth before thrusting them

into wooden shoes, looked Russian, but they spoke German. Although they were a mystery to the townspeople, they were industrious, and it soon became obvious that these shrewd folks invariably found the most productive farmland on which to establish themselves as master farmers.

Actually, the settlers were not Russians at all. Their ancestors had forsaken their comfortable homes for conscience's sake and begun the long arduous trek from Holland and Prussia to the rich, untamed farmland of Polish Russia. Their deeply imbedded pacifism based on their interpretation of Scripture and their subsequent stance against the militaristic government of their homeland evoked intense persecution and suffering. Russia at that time provided them a brief respite until Alexander II ascended the throne. It was at that time that they became interested in the United States, where Congress had recently passed a bill excusing conscientious objectors from bearing arms.

Like the spies of Israel, a deputation of twelve men left for America to find a new homeland where they could worship God without persecution and restriction. They visited communities of Mennonites already settled in Indiana, then traveled on up through Manitoba, Canada, on to South Dakota, Nebraska and finally Kansas. On their return, the deputation encouraged the struggling community to migrate to the rich farmlands of America and the freedom of religion they sought so desperately.

Paul's grandfather, Heinrich Frank Bartel, and his wife, Mary, joined the first group of fifty who left everything for the unknown continent. They gathered up

their few belongings and, with their three children, braved the wide, forbidding ocean in search of freedom, liberty and happiness. Three-year-old Henry Cornelius, Paul's father, who was born in 1876 at Gombin in Polish Russia, was soon to be introduced to the cruel rigors of the new life they sought in America. A few days before their ship docked, his one-year-old brother, Zacharias, took sick. As their ship entered New York harbor, he died. Mary laid her lifeless child on her bunk and wept.

Finally reaching Hillsboro, the still-sorrowing family began the difficult task of establishing themselves in this new land. A sod house soon took shape until a more permanent home could be erected. The family was continually hampered by poverty and misfortune, and life became one struggle after another for survival, all of which shaped the young Henry Cornelius.

In 1880, God in His everlasting mercy showered the small community with a heaven-sent revival. Young Henry listened to the moving sermons, but it was not until the summer of 1895, at about nineteen years of age, that he came to a full understanding of the assurance of salvation and the knowledge that his name was written in the Lamb's Book of Life.

His love for farming was interrupted when J.A. Sprunger, a widely known evangelist and founder of an orphanage in Berne, Indiana, visited the now thriving community. Under Sprunger's anointed preaching, Henry sensed the call of God to join him in his work. He was hesitant to speak with his father about leaving the farm, but one day while at family prayers he broke

the news. Much to his surprise, his father responded, "My son, if God is calling you, you obey."

So Henry journeyed to the Light and Hope Mission to begin his work for God. Such steps of obedience would characterize the rest of his life as well as that of his son, Paul. The determination to be obedient no matter what had characterized their ancestors and was once again shaping this new generation. It irresistibly moved them forward in each succeeding generation to the present time. Of all the things that symbolize the man, Paul Bartel, obedience to God's commands stands out most clearly. Nothing would ever stand in the way of obeying God.

It wasn't very long until Nellie Schmidt, one of the young deaconesses at the orphanage, caught the eye of Henry. In her sweeping black dress and perky black bonnet fastened under her chin with a big white bow, she was a pretty sight to behold. For Henry it was love at first sight, but for Nellie it was quite another matter. She simply could not stand this strange farmer from Kansas. His nose was too big, his hands seemed clumsy and his sense of humor was more than she could bear. Of all the things she might have coveted in life, Henry Bartel was not one of them.

However, with time and persistence, Henry won her heart, and they were married on November 4, 1900. On that very night, he confided in his young bride that he felt God calling him to enter a new door of service. Dutifully, yet not understanding the full significance of her answer, she responded that she was willing to obey God and go wherever He led

them. The stage was set. God had His servants ready for the next step.

In March of 1901 a man of marked dedication with a burning passion for China visited the Light and Hope Orphanage to speak in chapel. His name was Horace Houlding, and his messages gripped the heart of young Henry, who was listening for God's voice. China had just experienced a year of hate and carnage with the horrible massacre of 189 Protestant missionaries and their children, including more than thirty Alliance missionaries. Nevertheless, Houlding proposed taking a band of new recruits to fill the vacancies. "God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform" was his persistent message. No one could have foreseen how this one man with a burden for China would affect future generations of Alliance people who would respond to the call. Both Henry and Nellie sensed God speaking to them separately about joining the band of new recruits and moving to China.

Some years later, through the mysterious workings of God, the same preacher, Horace Houlding, visited churches in Oregon where he came in contact with John and Amelia Birkey who had migrated from Milford, Nebraska. They too heard the impassioned challenge of this man and sensed God's call. They responded and became new recruits for China. Years later, their daughter, Ina, whom Paul had first met in a missionary boarding school when she was just eleven years old, became his wife. (At some unknown time, this same Spirit-anointed missionary evangelist, Horace Houlding, visited Santa Barbara, California. He

was entertained by the family of Ruth Hitchcock who also responded to the call of God to serve in China. At the young age of nineteen, she made the journey to China that changed her life. She spent more than fifty years of dedicated service to God there. At one point during the Japanese war, she rescued more than 100 Chinese orphans by leading them out over the mountains as the communist forces threatened. Later, in Hong Kong, she served for many years as an Alliance missionary and had a great influence and impact on many lives.)

As Paul Bartel reflected on the impact of Horace Houlding on his family and on the Alliance, he frequently expressed his strong conviction "that God moves by His Spirit in times of revival and guides those who are yielded to Him in the work He wishes them to do." Although Horace Houlding was himself a missionary to China, seemingly his greatest contribution was his ability through passion, conviction and Spirit-empowered preaching to recruit others to commit their lives to that land.

From Ina Bartel's Diary:*My Father*

My father, John C. Birkey, gave his heart to the Lord when he was twenty-one years of age. It brought a change into his life and a deep commitment to God which he diligently kept throughout his lifetime. I remember his telling that when he became a Christian he had to make some things right. He had helped a company survey his father's land, and he felt he had been dishonest in some of the measurements.

One day, when he entered the survey office, the men were all sitting there smoking their big, fat cigars. He told them that he had become a Christian. By the time he got through, the cigars had been laid down, and the remarks were, "Young man, you are on the right track." He became a strong witness in the community and soon had opportunities to preach. His passion was missions. He gave much of his income to missions and was a man of prayer. He read his Bible through many, many times—sixty times!