

Letter From Texas

by Wayne Allensworth

Living With the Questions



It was hot out there, the sun glaring down on us in our suits and ties. The air was sort of smoky, the way it usually is down here near the Gulf Coast. A parade of suits and uniforms marched behind the fire truck. The casket was sitting in back, and the sun glared off our sunglasses and the stark metal of the fire engine. It was very green, too. There had been lots of rain down there. The sycamores, elms, and pecan trees were leafing out, and the massive live oaks lining the road provided a welcome canopy to guard us against the sun.

The bagpipes were playing songs I knew and ones I'd heard but couldn't remember the names of. We wiped our foreheads with handkerchiefs and kept walking.

It was Good Friday.

I didn't know I was a pallbearer until my family and I arrived at the Spring Branch Christian Church for the service, parting a sea of firemen and police cars ready for the big send-off. He had been a fireman and paramedic for almost 20 years. He had been my friend.

They had called me earlier that week and told me he was in the hospital and probably wouldn't make it this time. It was a shock, since he hadn't told me he was sick again. I had called him a couple of weeks back, telling him I wanted to come down and let him meet the kids. He seemed happy about that and as talkative as ever. And he never let on that he was so sick.

But that was the way he was. He didn't want anybody worrying or feeling sorry for him.

He had gotten back in touch with me a few months before, and I promised him I'd be around. Now that I think about it, I figure he knew then that he didn't have long. He was straightening up the furniture, tying up loose ends before he left. Funny, back in school I was supposed to be the tough guy, the strong one. But it

was him all along.

He used to do things for you and make you think it was your idea, so that you did not notice the kindness. I guess he didn't care about being thanked.

I walked next to Hank, our old buddy who became a preacher. He had married Marc off. Life, which had been mostly a parade of graduations and weddings and births for us, was taking a turn. Hank had buried Marc's dad. Now we were there. Hank's demeanor—talking and smiling—helped remind me that Marc didn't want sadness, or pity, or shrouds, emotional or otherwise. It's tough. I'm glad Hank was there to help.

The sun had shown bright through the stained-glass window, a gentle Jesus reaching from the skies to take us home in a scheme of reds and blues and whites and flesh tones. Bright life from beyond, sweet chariot riding away.

The church was full.

Somebody sang "How Great Thou Art," then Hank marched up to the pulpit and began talking about a conversation he'd had with Marc a long time ago, about how they had lots of questions, but few answers. "Is life worth dying for?" he asked.

He talked about death washing a tide over everything and about how nobody knows all the answers, like why this man died and another didn't. What we have is Jesus and living with the questions. What we have is the knowledge that Jesus came down here to live among us and that He shared our sorrows and worries and troubles. And when He cried out from the Cross, He shared our questions—and taught us to trust His Father when we couldn't answer them.

"There's no faith without doubt," he said. "No hope without anxiety. And no trust without worry. Trust Him."

So we carry the casket, draped in a Lone Star flag, out to the fire truck, and we walk to the station, and we sweat and talk some.

Some of those thick Gulf clouds pass over, and we can feel the dampness and the smoke in the air. Strangers line the street and watch us as we go by, kids grinning and pointing at the fire truck, a pair of boots and a helmet and a coat sitting on the last step behind the red machine. An older man takes his hat off and puts it over his heart. A fireman and a little boy

on the roadside salute.

There's a ceremony at the station, and Hank and I stand in the shade of the garage. The men take the flag and fold it and give it to Marc's wife, who hasn't cried. She takes the flag, and we line up to say goodbye.

The clouds pass over again, and a little breeze blows, drying the wet shirt on my back.

Wayne Allensworth has learned that being a Christian doesn't mean knowing all the answers.

Letter From Alaska

by Dexter and Lynette Clark

Dissolving the Political Bands



When Russia sold Alaska to the United States in 1867, most Americans were not convinced that the purchase of such remote real estate was a good idea. It was called "Seward's folly" or "Seward's ice-box." (William H. Seward was the secretary of state who negotiated the deal.) Until then, America had only acquired contiguous territory, which was expected quickly to gain statehood. Alaska was our first foray into colonialism, setting a precedent for the annexation of Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Guam, the Virgin Islands, and other possessions.

As soon as the Treaty of Secession was signed and even before Congress appropriated the \$7.2-million purchase price, a military government was set up in Sitka. Many years of neglect followed. Alaska was a lawless territory with no legal title to land. Violent criminals often went unpunished. The Army imposed order on native and white civilians, but only within the proximity of its six forts. Underpaid soldiers, who were far from home, often exploited the natives.

Statehood was debated for decades before becoming a reality. The statehood election was held August 26, 1958, and on January 3, 1959, Alaska became the 49th state. Alaskans thought this might

result in self-determination. Within 15 years, however, many were already thinking statehood was a grave mistake.

The Alaskan independence movement began in the early 1970's, when the U.S. Congress passed legislation that provided clear title for the rights-of-way required to build the Trans-Alaska-Pipeline System (TAPS). Because of the energy crisis precipitated by the OPEC oil embargo, and because the pipeline project was granted defense priority status, the necessary laws were fast-tracked.

In January 1973, as the final challenges and disputes were settled by the courts, TAPS got the green light with some unusual wording about the right-of-way being granted. Customary rights-of-way are described as being so many feet "either side of the center line." The right-of-way for TAPS reads: so many "feet, either side of the pipeline." The TAPS pipeline is four feet wide and almost 800 miles long.

The outright theft of these 400-odd acres was the last straw for gold miners Joe Vogler, Fred Wilkinson, and their friends in the Fairbanks "Cuss and Discuss" Club—a small, informal group that met regularly to talk politics during the long winter. Fred Wilkinson is a third-generation Alaskan, born and raised in the gold fields. Joe Vogler, who was educated as a lawyer, had passed the bar in Kansas before moving to Alaska in the early 40's. "Cuss and Discuss" was not a bunch of wild-eyed radicals but mostly conservative businessmen; the pipeline right-of-way was the last straw for them, however, and their reaction was to formalize their organization. Alaskans for Independence (AFI) was born.

AFI held regular public meetings. Officers were chosen. Joe Vogler was elected chairman. Committees dug into the mountain of paper generated by Alaska's transition from territory to state, and investigation of the statehood vote revealed some interesting history.

At every turn, the people's right to choose their political affiliation freely had been stymied. The timing was bad; the election was held in August, at the height of the very short work season for farmers, fishermen, and miners. The indigenous people were not represented; since ballots were printed only in English, most of the native Alaskans were precluded from voting. And, by an act of Congress, some 41,000 military personnel and their 36,000 dependents were allowed to vote as residents without losing

their established overseas status with all of its benefits—and it's hard to imagine any active service personnel voting against the wishes of the U.S. government.

International law was also at issue, as Vogler discovered. Since the adoption of the United Nations Charter by the U.S. Senate and its proclamation by President Harry S. Truman on May 29, 1945, the United States had been dutifully reporting, under Article 73, that Alaska was one of many "non-self-governing territories" under its rule. The final report for Alaska was sent in 1959.

The United Nations' General Assembly Resolution 742 and the attendant committee reports prescribed that inhabitants of non-self-governing territories be given three of four choices: remain a territory; become a separate and independent nation; accept commonwealth status; become a state. But the ballot used on April 24, 1956, offered Alaska only statehood—yes or no. The members of AFI became convinced that the vote had been illegal.

With donations from 1,500 card-carrying members, AFI placed a full-page advertisement in the May 9, 1978, Fairbanks daily *News-Miner* under the banner headline: "A VOICE IN THE LAND. ALASKA INDEPENDENCE PARTY." The article announced candidates for governor and lieutenant governor. Six years later, the state finally recognized this organization as "The Alaskan Independence Party" (AIP).

Joe Vogler headed the AIP ticket in the 1982 election. The results of that election and a challenge by Vogler to state election laws produced a 1984 court decision that put the AIP on the ballot again and lowered the percentage of votes required for state recognition of political parties. With states' rights as the main issue, Joe Vogler carried the party banner again in 1986, receiving nearly six percent of the vote statewide and nearly 20 percent in the Fairbanks area.

When Vogler opted not to run in 1990, the politically savvy former U.S. secretary of the interior (and former Republican) Walter Hickel accepted the AIP's nomination for governor along with running mate Jack Coghill. Running on the AIP's "Alaska First" platform, Hickel and Coghill were elected. Unfortunately, their outlook and loyalties were really still Republican. Governor Hickel did toss the AIP a few bones: His administration filed several lawsuits alleging violations of the statehood compact and ap-

pointed several AIP members to various commissions. That was all. The AIP suffered another blow in 1993 when Joe Vogler was murdered under peculiar circumstances.

Today, colonization continues in Alaska. Foreign-owned businesses are extracting the lion's share of the state's resources. British Petroleum controls Prudhoe Bay and the Alaskan Pipeline. Internationally registered cruise ships dominate the tour business on land as well as sea. Recently opened state-of-the-art mines are being operated by global mining companies. The salmon fishery has been so depleted by offshore operations that village subsistence fishermen have to fly in commercial dog food to feed their dog teams.

On the plus side, Alaska has taken some important steps to develop a national identity. For example, the state-owned Alaska Railroad is run as a for-profit corporation. Nationalizing the state's petroleum and natural-gas resources would represent the continuation of a natural progression toward the creation of the Alaska Oil and Gas Company. Such a move would be fully consonant with Alaska's constitution.

Alaska has sufficient financial and natural resources to function quite well as an independent nation. Native corporations created by Congress have grown into successful ventures with assets in the billions of dollars. An independent Alaska could still cooperate with the United States on matters of defense, allowing the Pentagon to lease land for military bases on a long-term basis. Alaska and the United States could remain trading partners as well.

To some, the removal of the Alaskan star from the American flag is a scary thought. To those still fighting Joe Vogler's good fight, it represents a chance for freedom—real freedom.

Dexter and Lynette Clark are founding members of the Alaskan Independence Party and coauthors of On Golden Ground.

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