

BWANA MGANGA

**The Life of
C. Donald Nelson**

Jack E. Nelson

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PRESERVING MEMORIES
Charlotte, NC

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Preface

Traveling around on remote roads in the Congo in 1961 was full of risks. The country had descended into anarchy shortly after being granted independence from Belgian colonialism in June of the year before. Attacks by roving bands of marauders and drunken soldiers on European settlers had forced the Europeans to evacuate in mass into neighboring colonies, sending much of the country's formal economy into a tail-spin. Katanga, the province richest in natural resources, had attempted to break away from the rest of the country and declare its own independence. The world's superpowers had quickly become entangled in the growing conflict, vying for control over most of the earth's known reserves of cobalt, as well as, large deposits of diamonds, uranium, copper and gold. In the midst of all the political instability, Patrice Lumumba, the newly independent nation's first elected prime minister, had been taken hostage and murdered. Evidence pointed to a Belgian plot—with CIA complicity—behind his execution.

An American missionary doctor by the name of C. Donald Nelson was, nonetheless, making excursions into rural areas in the far eastern province of Kivu during this period. On one occasion he was accompanied by another missionary, his close associate Richard Madsen. They were among the handful of Europeans and Americans left in that part of

the country. Most of their fellow missionaries had departed when faced with growing threats to their security. Determined to encourage church leaders and to continue providing medical assistance to people, they had returned after evacuating their families to neighboring Uganda. Together they bounced along in a small VW Bug down a dusty and rapidly deteriorating road toward a small mission station known as Bunyakiri, west of the city of Bukavu.

Their unexpected arrival at the mission compound, which had not had a missionary resident for some time, was a miraculous answer to prayers for the local school teacher and his wife. She had been in labor for more than a day, with severe complications preventing the completion of the delivery of their child. A small hand was sticking out, already showing signs of the baby's demise. The prospects of saving even the mother's life had been fading. There had been no transportation to use to take her to a hospital. What's more, as far as the family knew, there probably wasn't a trained physician left in the entire eastern region of the Congo. Given the circumstances, the young woman was facing a slow, painful death.

One can only imagine the surprise and hopefulness these people felt when, first, a vehicle pulled up, and, then, a doctor who they recognized stepped out. The Bwana Mganga (i.e., the healer), as he was known to Africans, had faced a lot of challenging cases by then in his medical work in the Congo and had a reputation wherever he went as a competent and caring physician. They had no idea that he was even in the country, yet here he was, the one person they knew who could help them most at that critical moment. Cases like this one, however, took more than training and skill. Known as a "transverse presentation" in medical terminology, the usual emergency treatment response would be a cesarean section to remove the fetus and try to save the mother. The problem was the doctor was not carrying around the kind of equipment needed to do any surgery, and it was a

long way to the nearest hospital. Even trying to take the woman to a hospital did not appear to be an option, as she probably would have died en route. The situation called for someone with the self-confidence needed to try the near impossible.

Dr. Don explained the risks to the young schoolteacher, his ailing wife, and other friends and family members who had gathered around. They had more faith in him at that point than he had in his own skills. After all, for them, he had arrived as an answer to their desperate prayers—surely he would follow through and bring healing. Other than a stethoscope, some tongue depressors and a variety of medications, he had little with which to work. Yet, in the years he had been in the Congo, often facing extreme medical conditions that would be a challenge for even a well-trained specialist, he had learned that if he did his best, then, even if he failed to save the patient, he could feel good about having tried. The alternative in that region of the country, where little medical assistance was available in the best of times, would have been almost certain death for many of those he treated.

The small group that had gathered, together with the two missionaries, knelt in prayer at the bedside of the suffering woman and petitioned God for a miracle. The doctor then scrubbed his hands as best he could and set to work. There was nothing ordinary about the procedure he attempted. Carefully and very slowly, he inserted his hand up into the woman's uterus. Such a tactic is almost unheard of—certainly not recommended in medical schools—given the extreme risk of rupturing the uterus. When the contractions from her labor would start, he worked to coordinate his efforts with those movements. For over an hour he persisted, working slowly, while his entire arm turned numb because of the pressure. Finally, he managed to get the fetus turned around and was able to pull it out by the feet. The baby did not survive, but the mother came through okay. Years later when practicing medicine in California,

Dr. Don told a number of his medical colleagues, trained obstetricians, about this incident. They shook their heads in total disbelief. Doctors are taught in medical school that it is not possible to accomplish what he had done.

Since 1964, C. Donald Nelson, a family physician with some surgical training, has been practicing medicine in Redding, California. During that time he spearheaded the establishment of emergency medical response teams in the six northeastern counties of California. He also took long periods off from his practice to raise funds for and oversee the construction and initial functioning of a hospital in the Caribbean nation of Haiti. More recently, he has developed a reputation as one of those rare doctors willing to devote time to assisting people suffering severe addiction to heroin and other drugs, and he has been instrumental in setting up halfway houses and an addiction recovery program.

Many of the thousands of patients who have gone to him for medical advice and treatment, as well as many of his colleagues and friends, do not know that he had an eventful career as a missionary doctor before he settled into his medical practice in California, that, at age seventy-six, continues to keep him busily occupied. Most are familiar with his other interests, particularly his dabbling in real-estate development. Some know him as the doctor who, after a morning of wearing latex gloves in a surgical theater, loves putting on a pair of leather gloves and getting on a bulldozer for an afternoon of pushing dirt. The fuel drums and five-gallon oil cans in the back of the pickup trucks he used to drive must have made more than a few people wonder, as would the smell of diesel coming from the Levi jacket he sometimes wore to the office.

Don's five sons and his wife of fifty-three years, Laura, have long known that his fascination with surgery and medical diagnoses is equally matched by a love for construction projects. To his missionary colleagues,

he was the doctor who, in reaching for a stethoscope in his back pocket, would often pull out a pair of pliers with it. He grew up in a logging community in Oregon where the ability to put in long arduous days of working with one's hands was a sign of strength and character. Going down to his ranch in nearby Cottonwood to put in afternoons working on one project or another continues to be a source of recreation and satisfaction for him. His preference has always been to be able to work with his mind *and* his hands, to enjoy the best of both worlds. But above all, he likes to imagine the possible—whether it be assistance to people suffering in a third-world country or the need for better medical treatment in this country—and then devote himself wholeheartedly until the dream turns into a reality. Taking the initiative, making things happen, and seeing projects through to their completion has been his forte.

One may well wonder how someone who grew up in a logging community in rural Oregon, where schooling was provided in a one-room schoolhouse and church programs were generally limited, could develop aspirations at an early age to become a missionary doctor in far off central Africa. That his dream was not forgotten but was cultivated and diligently pursued is testimony to the kind of determined young person Don was and how powerfully religious convictions can grip someone in their youth. The following account, based in large part on interviews with my father, Don Nelson, tells the story of his childhood in Oregon, his ten years as a missionary doctor in the Congo, his subsequent involvement in Redding, California, and his founding of a hospital in Haiti. In an age when it is so easy to just observe events from the sidelines, it is a story of someone devoted to the Christian faith who believed he could make significantly positive contributions to life in this world.

Growing up on Dixie Mountain, Oregon

The Nelson family roots in the little community that came to be known as Dixie Mountain, twenty miles northwest of Portland, Oregon, go back to 1888, when Don's grandparents homesteaded on 160 acres of timbered property on the crest of the Tualatin mountain range. The family had moved by covered wagon from Sonora, California, several years earlier, leaving behind exhausted gold fields in search of a simple farm life in Oregon. At the time, the attractive farmlands in the valleys of northwest Oregon had already been homesteaded. But people were just beginning to lay claim to the less accessible, forested region in the hills that rise abruptly from the west bank of the lower stretches of the Willamette River, four to five miles south of the town of Scappoose.

There on a spread they cleared out of the forest and called Dixie Ranch, Cornelius and Anna Nelson raised their six children. The youngest, Clarence, took to the woods when he was old enough to swing an ax and keep up with the strenuous work habits of the rugged men who harvested the old growth trees in the region. Then, after a stint in the Army, serving in France at the end of World War I, he returned to Oregon and married Grace Logan, who had spent part of her childhood on Dixie Mountain. Together they built a small cabin on an eighty acre homestead a few miles down the road from

where Clarence had grown up. Their first child, Elsie, was born within the first year of their marriage, and Don was born nearly three years later on October 11, 1925. A third child, Leona, was added to the family when Don was ten years old.

Even before his marriage to Grace, Clarence, had teamed up with his brother Walt to start a small logging outfit that they called Nelson Brother's Logging Company. At first it was just the two of them, working with a team of horses to haul logs down to a mill in Scappoose. Their operation grew in time, especially after they invested in a large steam donkey (a steam powered winch used to pull logs out of the woods). They eventually employed up to fifteen men and often kept five trucks busy hauling logs.

Don's father was a classic hardworking logger. He was a well built man, weighing 190 pounds and having a six foot stature, with a thirty-two inch waist. A modest, yet determined individual, he was well respected in the community. His real skill lay in keeping machinery running and setting up the "high lead" systems of cables used in winching the harvested logs. As a repairman he was good at improvising with what was available. A "magician with machines" was the way one person described him. When their logging operation moved to a new location, he focused on splicing cables, climbing "spar poles" to mount cable blocks, anchoring guy lines and hooking up the steam donkey to the entire winching setup. Most of his career in the woods spanned a period before there were chain saws, a time when trees were felled by men balanced on spring boards, swinging away with axes or pulling on crosscut saws. It was back-breaking work, yet loggers regularly put in twelve to fourteen-hour days, six days a week, in weather that was rainy as often as not.

This father figure would always remain Don's most influential roll model. His ingenuity and self-reliance, as well as his unflagging work

habits are traits Don learned to emulate from an early age. As a young child, Don grew used to hearing him leave for work before the sun came up. Only after sunset would he see him again, removing his caulk boots at the doorstep then entering the house, his overalls covered with sawdust, grease and grime. His evenings were often spent sharpening cross-cut saws with a file, working by lantern light, in preparation for the next day's work. Just as impressionable for Don was the respect that others had for his father. The men who worked for him had a high regard for him. Others in the community felt the same way. When a Grange hall was first being established in the Dixie Mountain community, a district officer of the Grange came to meet with community members to explain Grange by-laws and organization, as well as to preside over the election of officers for the new Grange chapter. Don remembers being taken along to that meeting. At one point in the meeting, the representative outlined the qualification needed by the person who would serve as treasurer, speaking of honesty and integrity, the need for other people to be able to trust the treasurer with their money. He then opened the floor for nominations. Someone in the audience promptly turned and looked at Clarence, then said, "Well, obviously, Clarence is the man for the job." Everyone else agreed and elected him unanimously.

Don's mother generally worked from dawn to dusk as well. Much of her effort was spent tending a vegetable garden and canning much of the produce to feed the family through the winter months. She also looked after the pigs and steers that were to be slaughtered to add to the family's food supply, meat that Grace canned as well. Somehow, she always found time to keep flowers growing around the house. If she did have a spare moment to sit, there was almost invariably a pair of knitting needles in her hands. The community quilting club and the church kept her socially active. And she raised three children, plus did the payroll for the logging business. Suffer-

ing from mild bouts of depression during much of her life, Grace was a quiet person who carried on in a helpful manner.

Clarence and Grace got around by horse and wagon when Don was a young child. Going down the hill on Pottratz Road on the way home one afternoon, it began to rain. Don was about two-years-old at the time. He remembers being in a small box and his parents putting a blanket over it to protect him from the rain. The little child protested and repeatedly tore the blanket off, wanting to see out. That is Don's earliest memory, and he thinks it says something about his early determination to get the most out of life. He also remembers being boosted up onto a gigantic log that his father and Uncle Walt had felled and walking along the length of it when he was no more than two or three. The woods, and the world of hard working logging crews, was the atmosphere in which he grew up.

There was time for family life, nonetheless, amidst all the hard work. Dinner was generally served late, but the family always gathered around a table together, sitting on wooden benches. Clarence invariably said a prayer of thanks before every meal. Fruits, vegetables and meat were served year round, given Grace's canning efforts. During the winter months when work demands slackened, Clarence liked to read to his kids in the evenings, selecting stories from newspapers and magazines. A trip or two to the Oregon coast was taken nearly every summer, often accompanied by some of their relatives. Ships sailing beyond the horizon captured Don's imagination on those occasions, launching him into dreams of being a sailor and seeing the world. Tours up the Columbia River gorge were another favorite family outing, with visits to Multnomah Falls, Crown Point and other scenic sites. Twice a year the kids were taken into Portland to see a movie, and Don remembers seeing *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, *Mickey Mouse* and other Disney classics when these movies first came out. There were also Sunday trips

three or four time a year into Portland to visit Clarence's sister and her husband, and other trips taken to nearby Hillsboro to visit Grace's mother and step-father. Shopping trips to town were also family outings, something Don has fond recollections of, particularly when supplies for the logging business were purchased.

Dixie Mountain was at that time a very rural settlement, without even a general store to mark the center of the community. Roads into the area were in poor shape, described as being a mile deep with mud during the wet winter months. Telephone service became available early in the twentieth century when community members strung wires from tree to tree for a party line, but electrical service did not arrive until after Don had grown up and left. Community life revolved around the one room schoolhouse and, intermittently—when a minister willing to travel up the hill could be found—around the little community church building. The Grange hall came later, built with volunteer help from almost everyone in the area, and became a place for social gatherings.

During the years of Prohibition (1916-33), the dense forests and deep ravines on Dixie Mountain became sanctuaries for people involved in moonshining. Another vivid memory Don has from early childhood involved an encounter with an angry moonshiner. Clarence stumbled on an unattended still while cruising timber one day and took his kids down to the site the following morning to give them some insight into the clandestine activities that went on in the area. This time there was an old woman looking after the brewing process and she did not take kindly to their poking around. Brandishing a six-shooter, she ordered them to get out. The sight of that menacing looking sidearm pointing right at him remained deeply embedded in Don's mind.

Nelson Brothers was not the only logging outfit harvesting timber off Dixie Mountain. Some of Don's other early memories are of workers from Brix Logging Company building a railway trestle across a swale

nearby where the Nelsons lived. The Brix operation, a comparatively large outfit employing over a hundred and fifty men, dominated the scene for nearly ten years and left vivid impressions in Don's mind of what men with their machines, their ingenuity and their hard work can accomplish. By the time Brix finished up on Dixie Mountain, much of the region had been stripped of old growth timber, all of it cut by hand, yarded in with steam donkeys, and hauled out on railway cars pulled by a steam locomotive.

Don was four years old when the stock market crashed in October of 1929. That fateful day came shortly after Nelson Brother's Logging had made a sale to a lumber company. With money to spend, the family went into Portland to get supplies. While Clarence went off to buy cables and parts needed for the logging operation, Grace took Elsie and Don to a toy store to give them an opportunity to pick out something for themselves. Don remembers finding a small toy truck, while his sister picked out a doll. Then, before the items were paid for, these kids saw their father come hurriedly into the store and speak in disturbing whispers to their mother. She immediately made the kids put their selected items back and they all left the store at once. Clarence had just heard radio reports of sudden, steep declines in the market. At that point Don only understood that something dramatic had taken place, but the effects of the ensuing depression extended through the rest of his childhood.

During those Depression years, in the wake of the Brix Logging operation, property sold cheaply on Dixie Mountain, and people down on their luck bought small "stump farms," hoping to be able to eke out a living off the land. Tar paper shacks proliferated in the community, many with only a dirt floor on the inside. By then, Clarence and Grace and their two children had moved from the cabin on their homestead to a new, better constructed house three or four miles up the road and not far from the little community church building. Their living conditions re-

mained humble enough but were better than most of the newcomers. People say they always had later model cars than others in the community and they were the first in the community to have a radio, which operated off a car battery. (News of the kidnapping of Charles Lindbergh's child was the first big story they heard on their receiver.) A demand for lumber remained even during the years of the Depression, and what Don's father and his uncle Walt lacked in education, they made up for with entrepreneurial ingenuity and hard work. The family was able to remain self-supporting, while unemployment lines grew and public works projects were initiated to provide relief for many from urban centers. Nelson Brothers Logging became one of the main employers on Dixie Mountain, matched only by a small lumber mill that cut railway ties.

This was a era when all too often those who came out with their dignity intact were people who scrambled to get back on their feet and make the most of bad situations, as economic conditions continued to deteriorate. The need to be resilient and self-reliant is something that was inculcated into Don's mind at an early age. He likes to tell people that they've got to learn to pick themselves up and keep going. "You can't just sit there and feel sorry for yourself. You've got to look for ways to make things better."

To illustrate this principle, he likes to tell an anecdote from his childhood on Dixie Mountain. Every year there was a community picnic that was always well attended. The kids looked forward to the organized games, the food and the ice-cream—a special treat in those days. One summer when Don was about five-years-old, there was a large mud puddle nearby where the afternoon activities were being held. Don, wanting to impress his peers, tried to cross the puddle, prancing across through the shallow water, barely keeping the water out of his shoes. His show-off effort floundered when he slipped and ended up sprawled

in the middle of the puddle. But he promptly picked himself up, got out of the puddle, brushed off the mud as best he could and gamely went on playing. Another, younger child who had watched Don, responded by attempting the same feat and, like Don, ended up lying in the muddy water. Rather than jumping up and getting out of the water, this child just lay there screaming in desperation and kicking water all over himself, alerting all the adults. His mother had to wade out into the puddle to pick him up, then proceeded to humiliate him further by paddling him for getting himself in trouble. Don says he couldn't help thinking, "How dumb can a person get?" We all fall down at times; most people get up and get on with it. But to lie there and scream about it and not get up is the biggest disgrace. The view that an individual is his or her own best resource for making things better continues to be an important part of Don's outlook on life.

For schooling, Don was enrolled in the same school his father went to for eight years and his mother had attended for several years during her childhood. The original log cabin school building had burned down in a forest fire that swept through the area a few years before Don started, so there was a new structure when he started attending. His most vivid recollection of first grade came during the first week of the school year, when one of the older students, angry about something, challenged the teacher to a fistfight. No blows were exchanged, which was a good thing for the young male teacher, who probably would have gotten the worst of it at the hands of a tough teenager from the logging community. That was the end of that kid's education but just the beginning of a long educational program for young Don.

With around twenty students packed into one room that had a wood stove in the middle of it, and eight grades being taught by one teacher, the education program at Wallace School left a lot to be desired. Teachers were usually young women, though occasionally a young man was

employed. For most of these instructors it was their first teaching assignment, and they would board with a family in the community during the school week and return to their homes in Portland or Hillsboro on the weekends. Wallace School, on Dixie Mountain, was not considered an attractive post, and teachers generally lasted only for a year or two. Don remembers a rather disruptive atmosphere reigning much of the time, with little actual studying going on. The teachers sometimes added to the pandemonium. One male teacher took pleasure in disciplining students by making the culprits stand at the front of the class with a wastepaper basket on their heads. Other students were then told to attempt to throw items into the basket, as often as not hitting the student, which was the point of the whole humiliation ritual.

The school kids, full of pranks, were an unruly bunch. Water pistols were popular one year, and Don admits to having filled his pistol with ink one day and sprayed the back of the teacher's yellow blouse. No one let on that it was ink, so the teacher finished the day with a blue splotch on her back. But that was a mild stunt compared to one he pulled a few years later on when he took a stick of dynamite from his father's supplies and set it off outside the school building at the start of the day. The teacher was really traumatized by that one, and Don admits it was one of the dumber things he ever did. But the kids on Dixie Mountain learned such pranks from their parents and other adults in the community. Setting off sticks of dynamite outside people's bedroom windows was a typical way of "chivareing" a newly married couple, that is, welcoming them home from their honeymoon. Such notions of fun left a bit of a deviant streak in some of the kids, something that remained with Don.

When Don entered fifth grade he was the only student in the class, so the teacher just decided to make the teaching task easier by promoting him to the sixth grade. As a result, Don graduated from eighth grade at age twelve. But when he started riding the school bus twenty miles

down the road to Hillsboro and attending high school there, it became obvious that his reading ability was that of a fourth grader and his other academic skills were equally limited.

There was more to preparation for life than school, however, and in other areas Don applied himself more diligently. For play during his early years, he was often left to entertain himself, though sometimes joined by his best friend, Jack Harris. Together they carved out of a road bank an elaborate miniature road system for their toy vehicles, with switchbacks constructed to negotiate sharp turns up the steep incline. Don spent many afternoons building a small functioning water mill in a drainage ditch along the same county road. That project got destroyed when the road maintenance crew plowed it out with a road grader; and it was a big disappointment for the young engineer when his father wouldn't let him rebuild his pride and joy. But the idea of harnessing water power had captured his imagination. [Later in life Don would supervise the installation of a number of hydro-electric plants.]

Increased chores around the home became a regular part of life for him, including milking the family cow every day. Shortly thereafter, he also joined the local 4H group and began husbanding his own livestock. As some of the residents on Dixie Mountain were beginning to purchase and use small, private electrical generators, the kids in 4H were taught the basics about electricity and electrical wiring. Don put his new knowledge to work when his parents bought a small generator and successfully, on his own, wired the family's barn for electrical lighting.

But more significantly, when he was nine, he started working in the woods for his father during the summer months. His job for the first few summers was that of "whistle punk." When a steam donkey was used to winch heavy logs up out of ravines, it was generally not possible for the donkey operator to see the choker setters, who attached the logs to the

hook at the end of the winch cable. A whistle punk was stationed where he could see the choker setters and send signals to the setters and the operator by pulling on a wire that activated a steam whistle on the donkey. The job required remembering a series of signals that would inform the operator when to stop and go, as well as when to move the line up or down the hill to position it for hooking up the logs. Given the potential danger to the choker setters working around heavy logs, they depended on the whistle punk for their safety. Being entrusted with that responsibility was a big boost to Don's self-esteem, as was learning to put in long days like his father, working as a logger. This was also during the Depression, when most of his young peers did well to work several weeks in the summer picking berries. So the dollar a day wage he was earning—when men earned only four dollars—made him the envy of his schoolmates. Being occasionally asked by his father to skip a day of school to help with the work in the woods added to his sense of achievement, cultivating a confidence in his ability that became crucial in the future.

There were close calls for this young kid working in the company of men. The most critical came on one occasion when he nearly drowned in the Willamette River. Clarence and Walt used to unload their harvested logs into an inlet along the river bank, and, when they had built up a good stockpile, they would bore holes in the logs they put around the perimeter of the raft of logs and use chains to link it all together, then hire a tugboat to tow the logs to a mill upriver. Boring the holes in the logs by hand with a four-inch auger was a strenuous task that Clarence and Walt used to work long and hard to get done. On one occasion when Don was only nine years old, his father and uncle Walt were busy boring holes, and Don was entertaining himself by jumping from one floating log to another at some distance from where the others were working. When a log spun un-

expectedly, he went in, and unable to swim, quickly sank. Fortunately, his father saw him go in out of the corner of his eye and ran to his rescue.

As he grew older and stronger, he was given new jobs in the woods. For several summers he worked along with his cousin Dale, Walt's son, sawing and splitting the firewood used to fuel the steam donkey. The donkey, designed such that a strong draft fanned the flames, could be a voracious monster when pulling in a load of logs big enough to fill a log truck. Keeping the firebox full of wood didn't allow for much time off. Around age fifteen, Don became the donkey operator one summer, a job that carried considerable prestige among logging crews. Later, he mostly ran the gasoline-powered loading donkey, requiring that he get up to go to work at 4 a.m. to start loading log trucks. He also graduated from building small-scale roads for his toy trucks to the real thing. His dad taught him how to eyeball potential routes for logging roads and to follow through with the necessary surveying. He then learned how to operate the small bulldozer that Nelson Brothers Logging had to construct those roads, a skill that would repeatedly come in handy later in his life and also remain for him a form of recreation and enjoyment. At age fourteen, he learned to drive, when he would accompany his dad taking loads of logs down the hill to the river and be allowed to drive the empty truck back up Dixie Mountain. Later, he spent some summers driving a log truck, and one summer, just before he entered medical school, he worked as a timber faller.

Most formative, Don feels, of all the experiences he had working in the woods while growing up was watching his dad and his uncle Walt solve problems. Whether they were deciding how to set up a spar pole to winch logs out of a steep ravine, trouble-shooting malfunctioning equipment or figuring out how to construct a road down a hillside, Don often overheard their conversations and learned their thinking process.

There was, first of all, a calm confidence that they projected, knowing that they could and would get the job done. Then there was the manner in which they set about accomplishing the task, taking the difficulties in stride. Also, watching them negotiate timber sales and the purchase of properties was part of this same learning experience. For Don, it was a lesson in self-reliance and self-confidence, learning that one can solve for oneself most of the problems one encounters.

When he first began riding the school bus down to Hillsboro to attend high school, the academic skills of this younger-than-normal freshman were definitely lagging. He credits teachers for recognizing his potential, despite the poor education he had received up on the mountain, and it wasn't long before he was gravitating toward the more difficult courses and performing admirably. Literature or writing classes were never among his favorites, but he developed a love for science and did well in mathematics. He also cultivated study habits that served him well during his years of higher education. With chores to be done when he got home in the evenings and poor lighting in the home for studying after dark, he learned to make the most of the one hour of study hall he had before the bus left for the ride back to Dixie Mountain. By focusing his attention totally on the task at hand, maintaining complete concentration on his homework, he found that he could get all his assignments done in that one hour at the end of each school day and remember more of what he learned than other students who spent hours in the evening slaving over their books.

Again, however, the more critical education Don received was outside the channels of formal schooling. Consequential changes occurred in his life at the beginning of his high school years, changes that led him to dream of doing extraordinary things with his life and gave him the religious convictions and moral foundation that have remained with him to the present. He, himself, wonders about how

things could have turned out completely different. At that time in his life the biggest thing going on in the Dixie Mountain community was the semimonthly dance at the Grange hall. Local musicians organized the event and played tunes to accompany square dances, fox-trots, polkas and waltzes. It made for respectable socializing until the word spread and people started showing up from all corners of the county. Soon it became an occasion for heavy drinking in the parking lot outside the hall. Drunken loggers seeking available women were prone to get into arguments that often broke into fistfights. Don initially got caught up in all the revelry. Along with his school friends, he mixed with young loggers who bragged of their drinking habits on the weekends and their exploits in the Portland bordellos.

About the same time that the Grange hall dances began getting popular, changes also started happening at the little Dixie Mountain Church. The small church building had been constructed in 1902 by members of the community, but worship services had always been rather intermittent. The community just wasn't large enough to support a full-time minister. Don's grandfather Cornelius was the backbone of the church in the early years, though he lacked the training for pastoral duties. Occasionally a minister from a neighboring community would make an effort to extend his ministry to Dixie Mountain, and enthusiasm would grow—interest that always seemed to fade after a few months. From time to time, an uncle of Don's mother, who was a Nazarene minister with Pentecostal/holiness convictions, would visit and hold revival services. The Nelson family also made trips to Hillsboro once in a while to attend the Christian Church. Still, spiritual life meant little to Don until a sustained revival occurred in the Dixie Mountain Church.

That revival on Dixie Mountain began in the fall of 1937, when a young man who had just completed ministerial training began making

Dixie Mountain his mission field. Rev. Albert Fuller worked as a carpenter during the week for his father-in-law, a building contractor in Hillsboro, and devoted himself to his real passion on the weekends. People loved his dynamic personality and responded to his energetic teaching. He devoted extra time to lessons for children during the worship services and appealed to young people to assist him in the ministry. Don, a freshman in high school at the time, resisted the challenge only briefly, before embracing it wholeheartedly. Fuller, who was young enough for Don to be able to identify with, became a role model who opened up a global perspective to his young disciple, persuading him that, with God's leading, one could venture forth and seize the initiative in doing something beyond the ordinary with one's life. In retrospect, Don views his decision to respond to the Christian teaching he received from Fuller to be the most important event in his life. A fire was ignited in his heart, challenging him to attempt great things for God.

Don compares the experience of his conversion to another dramatic jolt he received about the same time. One evening in the fall, it started raining as he completed milking the family cow and brought the milk into the house. He put the milk pail in the kitchen sink and went to light the wood stove. With a little paper and some kindling, he struck a match and watched as the flame started to grow. Then, just as he closed the opening on the stove and turned to go back to the kitchen, a sudden flash and a loud, explosive bang ruptured the silence, shattering a mirror hanging on the wall and filling the room with an uncanny energy. Aghast, Don thought the stove must have exploded and he ran for something to extinguish the fire. The first thing that came to hand was the pail full of milk, which he grabbed, then opened the door of the stove, ready to throw in the milk. But there, in the stove, all that greeted him was a small flame, the kindling just beginning to burn. Baffled, he ran outside the house. The air was full of smoke. A tall tree that stood nearby

was smoldering. A bolt of lightning had hit the tree, then followed the radio antenna that was attached to the tree down to the house, where it passed inside next to where the mirror had been on the wall. The side of the house was blackened from the intense heat. Likewise, Don's conversion awakened something in him and burned onto his heart and mind an indelible sense of conviction.

Fuller reached out to cultivate this faith. Early in his ministry on Dixie Mountain, he utilized his carpentry skills to make renovations to the little church building, adding knotty-pine paneling to the interior walls and constructing a baptismal tank behind the podium. Don shared in the work and became better acquainted with his new mentor in the process. A little later, Don began accompanying Fuller when he made visits to homes to invite people to attend church services. Clarence and Grace became actively involved as well, with Clarence faithfully providing rides to church for kids whose parents didn't attend. The little church was soon bursting at the seams with around seventy-five worshippers, nearly half the people in the community.

One of the things Fuller encouraged people to do was to tune into a radio preacher by the name of Professor Lowry, a teacher at the Bible Institute of Los Angeles. Lowry advocated scripture memorization as a means of cultivating one's spirituality and grounding one's moral values. Even though his program came on at 11 p.m., Don became an active listener and sent away for a packet of a hundred-and-fifty cards that had select Bible verses printed on them. The exercise proved to be a powerful stimulus in his life, both in sharpening his intellectual abilities and in shaping his character. In looking back over his life, Don thinks this memorization program was the most important part of his spiritual development. Faithfully, he memorized one verse a day and reviewed those he had learned the week before. Verses like Joshua 1:9: "Have not I commanded thee? Be strong and of a good courage; be not

afraid, neither be thou dismayed: for the LORD thy God is with thee whithersoever thou goest”; and Psalm 27:1: “The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? the LORD is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?” became his favorites. In spare moments, after milking the cow and doing other chores, he would crawl into the hayloft in the barn and spend time in prayer. He became convinced that he wanted to devote his life to serving God.

The idea of being a missionary first occurred to Don when Fuller began teaching about evangelistic work and the Christian mission to the world. This was a time when the worldwide mission of the church was gaining ground and there was much fervor for the effort in American churches. Even outside the churches—unlike later—few detractors voiced criticism; people viewed the civilizing effects of missionary work as a positive contribution on the part of the West to the undeveloped parts of the world. Fuller had a classmate when he attended school at the Bible Institute of Los Angeles who later went into missionary work in the Congo, and he suggested to Don that he start getting better acquainted with regions of the world where he might find a place to let God use him to help others.

Don took the suggestion seriously and began branching out in his reading interests. A book about life in South America initially intrigued him with the possibility of doing mission work there. Then a book he found in the school library by Martin Johnson on explorations in the Ituri Forest of central Africa captured his imagination. He began envisioning himself as a missionary in Africa. A year or two later, as his superior grades in science courses at school accumulated, Fuller hinted that he should consider being a medical missionary, earning a doctorate in medicine before going to the mission field. The idea resonated deeply in this eager student, filling him with ambition. At the same time, some people found it a little amusing when this pious young high school stu-

dent who had never traveled farther than the Oregon coast started telling them that he was going to be a missionary doctor in Africa.

Even if his own travel experience was limited, striking out into unfamiliar parts of the world was not an altogether unheard of theme for Don as he was growing up. Don's parents had built a small cottage just behind their home for Clarence's father to live in during his old age, making it easy for Don and his older sister to visit with their grandfather. The old man was fond of Postum, a substitute for coffee, and would serve it to them when they came by to converse. Cornelius was in his eighties, with a lifetime of stories to share. From him, Don learned about his great-grandparents leaving Denmark late in 1852 on a boat loaded with Mormon emigrants coming to America. Cornelius was born the year after they defected from the Mormons and settled in Iowa, and could remember his father working as a blacksmith in Council Bluffs. Later the family moved to northwest Missouri, from where Cornelius' father served in the Union Army during the Civil War. Cornelius struck out on his own at age nineteen to seek his fortune in the gold-rush towns of California, ending up working for a blacksmith named Julius Sutherland in Sonora.

Sutherland had interesting tales to relate, which Cornelius passed on to Don and his sister. He left home in Michigan in the spring of 1849 when the California gold rush was just getting started. Halfway across the plains he came down with smallpox. Not wanting the entire wagon train to become infected, the leaders of the party decided to leave him along the trail in a tent next to a stream, after arrangements were made with local Indians to feed him. A young Indian boy bringing food to the door of his tent every day would drop it and quickly run away. Remarkably, Sutherland recovered and made his way back home to Michigan. Still determined to go to California, he then sailed around the horn of South America and made his way up to the Sonora area. A few years

later, he returned home again, going overland, to marry the woman he loved. Together they then traveled by boat down the Mississippi and sailed to Panama, where they hiked across the isthmus before sailing on to San Francisco. Cornelius got along well with Sutherland, and even better with Sutherland's daughter Anna, whom he married in 1880. Then in 1886, Sutherland helped Cornelius rebuild a couple of old wagons and accompanied him and Anna, along with their two children born in California, on a move to Oregon.

These stories of intrepid people who left homelands to seek a better life were one more source of inspiration for the budding missionary doctor growing up on Dixie Mountain. By then Don had already accumulated considerable practical experience. The problem solving tactics and the steady, determined work habits he learned from his father and uncle were more significant, in his mind, than what he learned at school. The confidence he gained in the process was further heightened by the Christian perspective he adopted. The Bible verse, "I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me" (Philippians 4:13) became his inspiration.

He wasn't waiting until he got to Africa to be a missionary, however. In his senior year in high school he teamed up with his closest friends, Frank Dobra and Don Baker, to form a club at school. They called their organization the SOS Club, an acronym for Serving Our Savior. A dozen or more students met regularly to encourage each other in the Christian faith. Devoting their lives to full-time Christian service became a goal for most of the members of the club, and six of them eventually did enter the ministry in one form or another. For Don it was the leaping off point for more training in preparation for a life of Christian service.