GOD's AIR FORCE

My Tour of Duty With
ADVENTIST WORLD RADIO

ALLEN STEELE

Pacific Press®
Publishing Association
Nampa, Idaho | www.pacificpress.com

Contents

Foreword 7
Acknowledgments 9
A Note From the Author 11
Introduction 13
1. Learning to Live 19
2. Finding Myself 26
3. Three Loves 33
4. On the Air 40
5. The World Responds 47
6. Secret Christians 52
7. Life in Portugal 58
8. Can You Stay Another Year? 65
9. Challenging the Giant 71
10. Fall of the Dictator 78
11. Trials and Triumphs 83

12. A Stint in Local Radio 88
13. Asia Calling 95
14. Pulling It All Together 103
15. The Trumpet Sounds 110
16. Island Life and Beyond 116
17. Touching Hearts in China 125
18. Storms out of the Blue 133
19. Island Farewell 138
20. Europe Landing 143
21. The Banner Years 150
22. A British Sojourn 159
23. At Home in England 165
24. A South Pacific Assignment 170
25. Time in Oz 176
26. Back in the USA 180
27. The Navajo Call 188
How You Can Support Adventist World Radio 192

One

Learning to Live

I was born in Johnson City, near Binghamton, New York, in the midst of the Second World War. Both my parents were descendants of a French Huguenot family that migrated to the New York City area in 1700, a few years after the name of that city was changed from New Amsterdam to New York. My parents, Anna Elizabeth and Kenneth Steele, were both from the line of André Lamoureaux, a Huguenot Protestant. My mother's ancestry follows a direct line to the family patriarch, who fled France because of religious persecution. Her mother's maiden name was Elizabeth Lamoureaux.

André was born in a small inland village in France, where he learned about the teachings of John Huss and John Calvin. In his teens, he left home and traveled to the village of Meschers-sur-Gironde, near La Rochelle on the Atlantic coast, where, under the tutelage of his uncle, he became a pilot guiding foreign cargo ships through the shifting sands of the river Gironde to the major shipping port of Bordeaux. Eventually, he became a ship's captain. In his own small boat, he carried family members and fellow believers to Bristol, England. After a couple of years there, he made the more perilous sea journey in his small ship with family and friends across the Atlantic to New York.

My father's lineage to André was somewhat altered when a Scotsman,

Peter Steele Jr., married a Lamoureaux girl by the name of Charity. Peter was a Scotsman who immigrated from Ireland and jumped ship in Pennsylvania before it reached Philadelphia. The Steele family became farmers and eventually moved north to the Scranton and Wilkes-Barre areas of Pennsylvania. It was there that my grandparents' families, actually their two sons and two daughters, connected. My father married my mother, Anna Elizabeth Garringer, and his brother Ed married her sister, Arlene Garringer.

I do not remember anything about my grandparents. My father and his brothers left home as soon as they were able. My uncles rarely talked about their father, but when they did, it was not complimentary. I got the message that he was a farmer and a difficult man, who was very hard on the children—especially his sons, and they left home under less-than-pleasant circumstances. So, by the time I came along, those grandparents were out of the picture. On the other hand, my mother's parents were greatly beloved, and I was told how Grandmother Garringer used to sit me on her lap and cuddle her newest grandson when I was less than two years old.

My mother's parents were devout Seventh-day Adventists, having accepted the religion after a book salesman came to the door and sold my grandmother a Christian book. Her baptism was recorded in a Scranton newspaper. The headline read, "Adventists Hold Their Solemn Services of Baptism." The event took place on the Susquehanna River, meaning "Muddy Water," so named by the Algonquin American Indians.

"It was but the making of the day when old records were washed away and sought a resting place on the pebble bottom of the famous stream and new pledges and troths were plighted with the Creator," reported the newspaper. The reporter counted several hundred people lining the banks of the river, standing on a bridge, and clumping together in a small fleet of canoes and rowboats. One by one, the eight new believers were led into the chilly waters by a pastor from the Scranton church, who lowered them into the water with the words, "I now baptize you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." The last person to enter those cold waters that day was my grandmother, Elizabeth Garringer.

Times must have been hard for my parents when I was born; they already had three kids and were living on a farm in northern

Pennsylvania, just across from the New York state line. My older siblings tell of harsh winters when my mother ran the farm alone. My father, to keep the family afloat, took a job at a shoe factory in the city—the Endicott-Johnson Shoe Corporation—so he was away most days. He was an essential worker for the war effort because the shoe company was the largest army-boot manufacturer in the country.

In the winter, Dad stayed with relatives in the city and came home on weekends. The circumstances were especially hard on my mom; she was slightly crippled from birth with what she called a clubfoot, which required surgery to insert a metal rod in her leg so she could walk normally. Forever afterward, she struggled with leg and foot discomforts.

Thanks to the generous job benefits at my father's workplace, my parents had saved enough to put a down payment on their own property near a place called Little Meadows. To the delight of my sisters and brother, our farm was within walking distance of a magical summer vacation retreat at Lake O'Meadows, where they could swim and boat on lazy summer days. The lake was surrounded by small white rental cottages where families from the cities came to enjoy summer vacations.

My family became well known to the owners of the resort, who permitted my siblings to have free run of the place. We were so well known that I remember my parents saying they were actually good friends with the owners. It was a friendship that resulted in a gigantic move for our family two years after I was born. My brother, Darrell, became deathly sick during the winter months, and doctors told my parents he might not make it unless they took him to a warmer climate. Our friends who owned the nearby resort, hearing of the problem, made my dad an offer: his farm for a house they owned in St. Petersburg, Florida. The idea of never-ending sunshine made Dad immediately decide to take them up on the deal. In 1945, he packed up the family in his old black Buick and joined the postwar masses of people migrating south and west.

At only two years old, I don't remember that epic trip. But I do remember a subsequent journey when we all piled into that old Buick and traveled back north to visit relatives. To save money and time, my dad decided we would travel through the night. But late in the evening, as we were traveling through open-range country in north Florida, a cow walked right out onto the highway in front of our car.

The crash damaged the radiator and right front fender of the car, and we were stranded in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night! Traffic was rare at that time of day, but finally, a kind trucker stopped and offered to pull us into the next town so we could find a repair shop. The local mechanic's garage was closed, but the owner and his family sympathized with our plight and invited us to spend the night in their new, unfinished house behind the garage. It offered a roof over our heads, but it had no windows or doors, so we spent a miserable night in mosquito country. The next day, while the car was being repaired, the family offered us a meal of potato salad and deep-fried pigs' tails.

My mom was horrified by the meal. She had been brought up by Adventist parents who knew pork was an unclean food. But she graciously thanked the family because we would certainly enjoy the potato salad and some snacks she had brought along. The mechanic spent a full day beating out the metal on the front fender so it wouldn't scrape the wheel, and by evening, we were again on our way north, headed for the Blue Ridge Parkway in Virginia and through Maryland into familiar scenery—the rolling green hills of Pennsylvania. My dad had to stop frequently to put water in the car's radiator, which had a small leak from the cow accident. I can still picture him catching cold water at a roadside waterfall when we were still on the Blue Ridge Parkway in the Appalachian Mountains. It was a most memorable family travel experience.

When the family had finally settled in Florida, my mom started looking for a church. We kids were soon attending Bible studies and church services at the Adventist church in the Mound Park area of the city. My father thought the church demanded too much of its members, plus he thought he was not good enough to go to church, so it was a one-sided attempt at Christianity, with my mom leading the way the best she could.

Both of my parents had to find work to support the family of four children, with another soon on the way. My mom first got a job as a waitress at a restaurant that made its own potato chips. I remember how amazed I was to visit the shop's kitchen, where I saw the chips frying in a vat of oil. Eventually, my mom met a family in the church who ran a rest home, and through that connection, she became a nurse's aide and later a nurse. My dad temporarily joined a construction crew that was building houses in the booming city of St. Petersburg. Later

he was employed for many years as a maintenance supervisor at the Municipal Repair Shop.

Dad was proud to have a permanent job with the city government. He was loyal to the city; years later, when he retired, he was lauded for his long tenure. My main memory of his job was when our family attended the annual Christmas party for city employees. Numerous door prizes were handed out, and my dad always hoped to win a television or radio as a prize. But every time his name was called, he received a big tinned ham. He was disgusted when that happened because he knew my mom would not let him bring "that thing" into our house.

Much to the delight of us kids, the Gulf of Mexico's beaches were a short drive away, and we often joined other young people from church for an evening at the beach. We could roast vegetarian hot dogs over a small fire in the sand, followed by roasted marshmallows. Even with the austerity at home, we thought life was good.

Not long after our arrival in Florida, my baby brother, Lanny, was born. I remember well the night Mom was taken to the hospital for the delivery. It was in the middle of a hurricane. The storm was slashing telephone poles and blowing down trees onto the streets. My dad became the hero of the family for dodging all the obstacles to get my mom to the hospital in time for the delivery. We kids were enamored with our new brother. Lanny and I became playmates once he was old enough for me to boss him around.

When I was six years old, our church opened a school in a downtown neighborhood—a house on a corner residential lot had been converted into a two-room school. Two teachers taught grades one through eight, half in one room and half in the other larger room. My mom desperately wanted us to be students in that school, so she took on a second nursing job to afford our tuition. That meant she was away from home for most of each day. And when she was at home, she was extremely tired and needed rest. It was about this time that she was diagnosed with diabetes, and her life got even busier with insulin, needles, and stress.

To get to school, we had to ride a city bus that had a stop just one house away from where we lived. One of my early heroes was the bus driver, whose name was Lottie. Every morning we greeted her as an old friend. A disappointing aspect about the bus ride to school was that I was not permitted to sit in the back seat. For some reason, I thought

it would be fun to be in the back, where I could observe all the people getting on and off the bus. But a sign over the back row read, "Rear seat reserved for colored." As a first-grader, I couldn't understand why those people merited reserved seats. I was too young to understand the meaning of segregation.

The bus route on Fifteenth Avenue South marked the dividing line between whites and blacks in the city. South of that line lived the whites, including the first block where we lived. In search of playmates, I made friends with some of the black children in the first house on the other side of the street. We played hide-and-seek in the palmetto scrub. Occasionally, I would end up on the back steps of their house, where I sat and watched the chickens pecking the black dirt for anything edible.

My older sisters, Elsie and Eileen, became after-school babysitters for Lanny and me. I resented my mom's absence, so I took it out on my sisters by cooperating as little as possible. Even so, they accepted the responsibility, and my memories of those days are mainly of their attempts to keep me in line and their efforts to invent meals that Lanny and I would eat. Later they both left home to attend the church's boarding high school in a distant city.

My older brother, Darrell, continued to live at home but had an especially hard time adjusting to public school. He preferred his teen friends from church, for which my mom was thankful, but it seemed even with those friends, he was always getting into trouble. His high jinks became legendary as he roamed the city with his buddies, and they got into trouble with neighbors and were noted on a police watch list. My dad was at his wit's end to know what to do. Shouting arguments between the two became common.

I remember the day when Darrell decided to leave home. He didn't tell Dad he was leaving, but somehow Mother found out, probably from my older sister. Mom knew there was nothing she could do to stop him from going, so she made lunches for him and his friend, prayed with them, and sent them on their way with all the money she had in her purse. Eventually, he sent a letter home saying he got a job on a ranch out west. I was jealous—my greatest desire was to be a cowboy too. In later years, I left on an overseas mission for the church, and eventually, my brother became an ardent promoter of missions and helped build schools and churches in Central and South America.

When I was in the third grade, the church bought a property about

ten blocks from our house for a new three-room schoolhouse. Lanny and I were soon enrolled. The first two years of high school were also offered there, so I eventually moved to the upper-grade classroom. My mom was still working two jobs, but with the school so close, we could walk, putting less of a financial burden on my parents. Our walk to school was about five blocks through our neighborhood to the Atlantic Seaboard railroad tracks. We then walked the tracks for about three blocks, over a railroad trestle, and around a small lake to get to school.

The wooded area along the tracks was a great adventure playground for neighborhood kids. But the vacant lands were full of rattlesnakes, so we had to learn how to avoid them: walk quietly, keep an eye out, and don't be the last one in line when you were walking through the palmettos because the snakes would always strike the last person, or so we believed. And at the shores of the lake were more poisonous snakes—copperheads. Sometimes we would see the beady eyes of an alligator in the lake.

One day when I was in the ninth grade, our teacher discovered the lone alligator in the lake had died, probably of old age, and was lying just across the field from our school. So we had a biology class in the open air as he dissected the seven-foot gator and pulled out its inner organs with his hands. He found its heart, liver, and other organs, which he eagerly displayed before our wavering eyes.

It was in these teen years that I gained new confidence. The financial struggles of my parents to pay the private school's tuition were well known by church leaders, so the school board chair offered me a summer job, painting and cleaning around the school. Later a kind church member, a master electrician, got me a job as a helper at his company, so I spent numerous summer days pulling electrical wires through fiberglass-filled attics or squirming among spiderwebs and scorpion nests under the floors of wooden houses. My mother contributed what she could for our tuition, but these jobs and generous donations by church members kept us in the private Adventist school.

Many years later, when I became a member of school boards myself, I remembered the kindness of those generous people. It was that kind of sacrifice that got me through eighteen years of Christian education. I forever afterward have been a champion for Adventist Christian education.