



Ralph Woodrow Evangelistic Association, Inc.

P.O. BOX 21, PALM SPRINGS, CA 92263-0021

WATER

By Ralph Woodrow

Recently, while reading the life story of a desert pioneer, Marshall McKinney, I received a new appreciation for something many of us take for granted: *water!*

Born in 1904, Marshall was about six years old when his family moved to the desert, settling first in the Morongo Valley area north of Palm Springs. At that time the government was giving away 160-acre parcels of desert land, but certain requirements had to be met. Homesteaders had to build a dwelling, live there for a period of time, and *put down a well*.

Despite summer temperatures that reached 120 degrees, no air conditioning, sand storms, rattlesnakes, and isolation, Marshall's father moved his family to the desert. His purpose was to obtain a land grant, but also to become a well driller for other homesteaders.

He had purchased a huge steam-operated rig—primitive by today's standards—which, along with the necessary tools, required three horse-drawn wagons to move it from place to place. Before digging a well, it took several days to set up. To make steam, considerable water was needed, water which was not available at the site—that's why a well was needed!

The closest water might be hours away. A wagon with a 500-gallon water tank was used for this purpose. But if too much water was hauled at a time, the horses were unable to pull the wagon across the desert sands. Usually firewood was not readily available either, but might be found along a wash from dead cottonwoods or, preferably, mesquite.

Sometimes when drilling a well, Marshall's father would hit a solid rock deep down in the ground. For this he had a huge chisel-type instrument that weighed 450 pounds. To increase the weight, a bar of steel about twelve feet long and weighing 250 pounds, as well as some other parts, were bolted together. One time the parts came unbolted, about 100 feet down, and he had to go to Los Angeles to rent a special tool.

By using the trail through Little Morongo Canyon, it took six hours to walk to the railroad station north of Palm Springs. From there he went by train to Los Angeles (106 miles) and

made arrangements to have the special tool shipped out to the desert. He then returned by train and walked the six hours back to the well-drilling site. Allowing four days to make sure the tool would be at the station, he drove his horses and wagon by road—which took eleven hours—picked up the tool, and drove the eleven hours back. After spending nearly two days, he successfully retrieved the parts from the well. He then drove the horses eleven hours to the railroad station to return the tool to the dealer, and eleven hours back! (What then took *eleven hours*, would now take about a *half hour* by car on a paved road!)

Marshall tells of two families that lived on adjoining homesteads with several small children, a horse, two cows, and some chickens. They built their small houses next to each other with little more than the property line between. Apparently they chose to live close because their nearest neighbor, otherwise, was *five hours away*. And, that was their *closest* place to obtain water—thus the need for their *own* well.

Those who have gone before have benefited us. We have entered into their labors (cf. John 4:38). This is true in many things, like the highways we drive, bridges we cross, and certainly the water systems we tend to take for granted. How different our lives would be if, like the woman at Jacob's well (John 4:6-26), we had to carry all the water we use from a distant well!

As settlers moved westward in this country, they were often forced to take much longer routes in order to have water for the needs of their families and horses. Their very life depended on it.

Some may recall a song from the 1940s by the Sons of the Pioneers, "Cool Water." It told the story of a man and his horse, lost in a barren wasteland, searching for water. Words like, "Old Dan and I with throats burnt dry and souls that cry for water," described their condition; other words expressed hope that "way up there he'll hear our prayer and show us where there's water."

When I was in my early teens, we were entertained one night at a church camp as different skits were performed. In one, a young man kept saying, "Water! Water!" It was as though he had been lost in a desert for days without water.

“Water! Water!” he frantically cried. This went on for some time, until finally off in the distance he seemed to see signs of civilization. Staggering on in that direction, he continued his desperate cry for water. As he drew near, someone came out to meet him and handed him a glass of water. He grabbed the glass, pulled a comb out of his pocket, dipped it in the water, and *combed his hair!*

Typical of stories with a twist, the surprise at the end provides the punch—as juvenile as this one is. But in the real world, multiplied thousands of people have doubtless died of thirst, being unable to find water.

In the Bible, wells were highly regarded and mentioned quite often (Gen. 24:11, 1 Chron. 11:17, etc.) If people of one tribe wanted to cause havoc for another, they would stop up their wells. This is what the Philistines did to the wells that were dug by Abraham’s servants. But later, we read:

“And Isaac dug again the wells of water, which they had dug in the days of Abraham his father; for the Philistines had stopped them up” (Gen. 26:18).

This is a great preaching text with a spiritual application. We need to dig again the *old* wells, as it were, making certain that nothing hinders the flow of the Holy Spirit in our lives!

People who forsake the ways of God are termed “wells without water” (2 Peter 2:17). But those who drink of the water that Jesus gives, have within them “a well of water springing up into everlasting life” (John 4:14).

The accompanying old drawing portrays the sad case of people obtaining water, but not realizing it is unfit and could even cause death. In many parts of the world, there are multitudes of people who needlessly suffer on and on because of polluted water. I admire missionary organizations that go into poverty-stricken villages and take the necessary steps so people can have safe water to drink.



In the Bible, even Timothy suffered misery because of impure water. Thus Paul’s instructions: “Stop drinking only water, and use a little wine because of your stomach and your frequent illnesses” (1 Tim. 5:23, NIV).

“Beer,” a well-known word in our culture, has a different meaning in Scripture. Coming over into English from the Hebrew text, it means *well*. Examples include: “Beer Elim” (Isa. 15:8). “Baalath Beer” (Josh. 19:8). “Wherefore the well was called Beer Lahai Roi [Well of the One Who Lives and Sees Me]” (Gen. 16:14). “Wherefore he called that place Beer-sheba [Well

of the Oath]” (Gen. 21:31). Names given to wells, like Beer-sheba, commonly provided names for the towns that developed in those locations.

“From Dan even to Beer-sheba” (Josh. 20:1; 2 Sam. 3:10) was an often-used term to describe the north-south limits of Palestine—another way of saying from one end to the other of that country.

The phrase once came up in a Sunday School class. Someone asked, “Am I correct in assuming that Dan and Beer-sheba are the names of *places*?”

“Yes,” the teacher responded.

“Really? I always thought they were husband and wife—like Sodom and Gomorrah!”

As we think about it, quite a few names of our cities and towns today have a link with *water*—names that include words like lake, wells, springs, falls, river, ocean, or beach. I am thinking just now, not only of Palm *Springs*, where we live, but also the nearby communities of Desert Hot *Springs* and Indian *Wells*.

Still other examples come to mind: Salt Lake City (UT), Lake Charles (LA), Lakeport (CA), Colorado Springs (CO), Niagara Falls (NY), Klamath Falls (OR), Virginia Beach (VA), Long Beach (CA), Oceanside (CA), and Riverside (CA). My maternal grandparents, in their move from Missouri to California nearly a century ago, decided on *Riverside* because Grandma saw it on a map. It sounded like a nice place to live.

I grew up in Riverside, but my place of birth was San Jacinto, California, about 30 miles away. Confusing to some, the “J” in San Jacinto is pronounced like an “H” (the same as in San Jose and Mojave). As a boy I knew this, but I had never learned how to *spell* “San Jacinto.” Upon entering Jr. High School, a teacher told me I would be filling out papers with the place of my birth the rest of my life. She made me write “San Jacinto” over and over and over—so many times I have never forgotten the spelling!

Being born in San Jacinto also had a link with water. A 13-mile tunnel beneath Mount San Jacinto was being constructed to bring water from the Colorado River into southern California. This had boosted the economy of the area in the late 1930s. It was depression time and many people, including my father, had to take jobs wherever they could find them. For this reason my parents moved from Riverside to San Jacinto for a couple years where my father obtained a job as a meat cutter.

California has an imbalance between water and population. It is said that two-thirds of the people live in the southern part of the state, but two-thirds of the rain falls in the northern part. As millions of people eventually settled in the Los Angeles basin, there was simply not enough water for everyone. Consequently, water has been brought from the Feather River and the Owens Valley (north of Los Angeles), as well as the Colorado River to the east. All of these massive projects have been expensive and controversial, reflecting how important water really is.

Because *water* is so vital, the biblical prophets commonly used it as a symbol of God's blessings and of salvation:

"With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation" (Isa. 12:3).

"There is a river, the streams whereof shall make glad the city of God" (Psalms 46:4).

"Rivers in the desert" (Isa. 43:19).

"There shall be showers of blessing" (Ezek. 34:26).

"He shall come unto us as the rain, as the latter and former rain unto the earth" (Hosea 6:3).

"Ho, everyone that is thirsty, come to the waters and drink" (Isa. 55:11).

"Whosoever will, let him take the water of life freely" (Rev. 22:17).

Numerous hymns and gospel songs use the theme of water: "Where the Healing Waters Flow," "Drinking at the Springs of Living Water," "Spring Up O Well," "Showers of Blessing," "Its Beginning to Rain," "There is a River," etc.

When I was a teenager, we used to sing a chorus: "I've Got Peace Like a River." Because a river is sometimes not peaceful—may overflow its banks, leaving death and destruction in its path—I wondered if this chorus was "Scriptural." But one day I read almost those exact words in Isaiah: "I will extend peace to her like a river" (Isa. 66:12). Certainly this chorus was based on Scripture!

A river can be defined as a large amount of water that is *flowing*, continually receiving more from a *higher source*. So, God's peace like a river, speaks of his unlimited, abounding supply. Imagine a man drinking water at the bank of the mighty Mississippi River. He could never drink it dry! Neither can we exhaust the abundant, overwhelming peace that God has promised! (Phil. 4:7).

"In the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out, saying, If any one thirsts, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:37,38 NKJV).

While Jewish priests chanted the words of Isaiah 12:3 about drawing water out of the wells of salvation, a golden container with water from the pool of Siloam was carried in solemn procession to the altar of sacrifice and its contents poured out. The ritual commemorated the time their forefathers had supernaturally received water in the days of Moses. But for the majority of those people, what had been a reality in the days of Moses had degenerated into mere ritualism. They talked of living water, their ceremonies symbolized it, they sang about it, but failed to recognize in Jesus the very fountain of living waters.

It was in this setting—with *water* on the minds of the people—that Jesus cried out: "If any one thirsts, let him come to me and drink"! The earthly waters of the ritual did not satisfy; the people were thirsty still. But through *Jesus*, we can find the true water, a satisfaction for our thirst, "a well of water springing up into everlasting life" (John 4:14).



Ralph Woodrow and "Borneo Bob" Williams

Missionary Bob Williams, affectionately known to many as "Borneo Bob," is a special and dear friend of ours. This month, November 27, 2006, he will turn 96.

Back in 1938, with his wife and two children, Bob left on a ship for the mission field. Times were hard and he ventured forth by faith, having no guarantee of support.

Most of us have heard of the "wild men of Borneo"—these were the people to whom he went, some of them hostile head hunters. They would cut off someone's head, put it on a stake until the flesh dropped off, and then keep it as a trophy. Some dwellings were decorated with many of these. Anything the word "heathen" conjures up was there—filth, disease, superstition, ignorance, demonism.

After completing language school in Makassar, upon their arrival in Borneo, a boat took the young Williams family far up the Kapuas River. Day and night plowing against the brown tide, they were enveloped by the green jungles and entertained by monkeys swinging from tree to tree while chattering at them. Naked children waved while splashing and diving from floating boat landings with little dugout canoes and "outhouses." The river served as a sewer, a place to bathe, and a source for water to drink!

Being on the equator, Borneo has a hot and humid climate—a temperature around 90 degrees, with 90 percent humidity. Imagine this when there were no electric fans or air conditioning! It rained so much, witch doctors performed rituals in an effort to *stop* the rain. At night, sleeping was beneath a mosquito net. When Bob built a baptistry in the river, it was necessary to make it "crocodile-proof"!

"At Sungai Mayam," Bob has written, "we found an old house that had been deserted years before by a Chinese trader that was now in a state of semi-collapse. The owner agreed to let us use it for a mission station, but he made no mention of the tenants who were occupying it at the time. These 'tenants' were snakes!—everything from tiny

(but deadly) vipers, to pythons and cobras. We never did get entirely rid of the snakes, but not one of us was ever bitten. I put on a new roof, and repaired the walls and floors. Crates and boxes were made into shelves. No white people had ever lived around there before. Gradually our Dayak neighbors became less suspicious and more friendly. They listened to the hymns we sang. Little by little they began to follow, at first under their breath, then out loud. Never in their lives had they tried to sing; now they loved it. To let them know that God *loved* them was a new revelation, for the only god they had heard about was the one described by witch doctors—an *angry* god.”

From these humble beginnings and through many trials and life-threatening situations, a harvest of souls eventually emerged. It has been estimated that over 20,000 Dayaks have come to Christ because of Borneo Bob’s ministry! The seminary he later founded in Pontianak has graduated hundreds of preachers and Christian workers who have extended, and will continue to extend, the work of Christ’s Great Commission.

Franklin Graham has worded it well: “Borneo Bob is a legend....After all the many years of faithful service to our Lord, his vision has not dimmed. He is a picture of steadfast faithfulness in a world of change and compromise.”

In recent years Bob has lived in Fresno, California (ministry address: Asian Partners Inc., 5415 N. West Avenue, Fresno, CA 93711), but has continued to make missionary trips to Borneo (now called Kalimantan). He will be there again this month, November 2006!

For a more complete account of the exciting life and ministry of “Borneo Bob,” his narrow escape in World War II, and the founding of New Tribes Mission, you may request a free article I wrote to honor him on the occasion of his 90th birthday (November 2000). —Ralph Woodrow

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RALPH and ARLENE WOODROW
P.O. Box 21, Palm Springs, CA 92263-0021
Toll Free Order Line: (877) 664-1549
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