

Setting the Record Straight

Memoirs of a Chenaniah Singer

by Eric Yodis

Introduction

My desire to record what took place more than 25 years ago took root at a recent class reunion at the meager Bible college where five of the best years of my youth were spent skipping chapels, pulling pranks, running around at night in a cape and trying to find ways to procure my next meal. The miracle of life while I was a student was that I should remember anything that was said in class or that a respectable school such as Southwestern would risk their entire reputation by graduating a person such as myself. Even more baffling was the wonder at how I should have become part of the school's public relations apparatus and part of its main recruitment arm, The Chenaniah Singers.

It began with an audition in the Fall of 1981. I was a poor, first-year student at what was then voluminously entitled, Southwestern Conservative Baptist Bible College. I lived hand to mouth and sometimes had no idea where tomorrow's sustenance would be found. So when the music director, Mr. Lanning, suggested that I come to the try-outs for the scholarship singing group and that I stay for dinner, I agreed without hesitation. They were going to feed me. You might imagine my disappointment, when after several hours of auditioning, I walked through the cafeteria dinner line where two workers stood with utensils in hand and hairnets in place, ready to serve. The first worker dumped a scoop of canned uncut green beans on a section of my platter. The next worker plopped a thick slab of hot bologna on another section of my tray. I stood there speechless. Are they serious? Is this what people at this school eat? I raised my eyes and scanned the walls of the kitchen. There were entire shelves with number ten size cans labeled "Green Beans" and nobody was ashamed. I knew then and there that I should maintain my off-campus status as long as possible. My frozen burrito diet suddenly seemed like the food of the gods.

Fortunately for me and two other young men, three of the male singers in this octet were resigning at the end of that year. The bass spot was open, and I had the fortunate ability to fake really low notes by swallowing the microphone and controlling the pitch of my stomach's growling. I was in and that was all that mattered. For the next three years, I would sing bass and play the role of loose cannon for the group. For three years, I would endure Mr. Lanning's verbal abuse as he tried to get me to man-up. Singers should not be wimpy. It is bad enough that we have to wear a pink sash on our graduation robe, so there is no excuse for reinforcing the feminine stereotype.

"Yodis! Go lift some weights!" or "Yodis! Go play some football!" he would holler. It was only years later that I figured out why he would yell these commands in my direction.

I would scratch my head and say, "O.K. Mr. Lanning. Should I do that before or after choir practice."

"Just get out'a here."

I was amazingly secure in my boyhood and I had no idea that Mr. Lanning considered me to be a bit of a dandy, but I digress. The point is, I endured all this for a two-thirds scholarship, for three square meals a day for ten or so weeks each summer and for the

opportunity of doing what I loved doing more than anything else - expressing myself in song.

That was many years ago. Now at this reunion in February of the year 2010, Chenaniah singers, pianists and sound technicians gathered for the first time to catch up and to reminisce. There were tears and cries of joy upon seeing each other after so many years. The small cafe where this meeting was taking place was ill equipped for such a group, but the patience of the waitress was magnificent. Then the stories began to be told.

For some reason, I have not the slightest notion why, people seem to enjoy telling stories about me and the people around me. In my older years, I have learned to loath any sentence that begins with the words, "I remember when you...". For example, I was recently talking to a former secretary. Her name is Joanne Towner. She is retired and remains a beloved friend of our family. Here she tells one of those "I remember when you..." stories from when we worked together at First Baptist Church in San Jose:

"You used to embarrass me so much!" I listened incredulously. "I used to say, 'Fiddledeedee', when something messed up. **I remember when you** heard me say the word 'Fiddledeedee' you would go into the hallway of the church office outside my door and yell, 'Oh my goodness! Joanne just said the "F" word!'... I was so embarrassed."

That morning, at the reunion of our esteemed choral group, I heard those same familiar four words repeatedly. However, after twenty and five years, the stories had become a bit jumbled. Some stories included people who were not even there. Other people combined stories while other people took a story that happened in one town and split it up between two towns. I had not enough heart to correct people as they told stories and visibly took so much joy in their recollections.

God has cursed with the ability to remember all kinds of useless information. Within three years after completing seminary, I had actually forgotten more Hebrew than I had learned. Why? Because knowing another language (especially a Biblical language) is useful information. If my professor had started the class by saying, "This is useless information that you will never need again in your entire life", I would have remembered it all and you might have had to read this page from right to left.

Instead, I remember in which state of the union I walked in my sleep in nothing more than what former Chenaniah tenor, Steve Ambrose, referred to as "skivvies". I remember the pool in the backyard as well as the layout of the house. I remember exactly what the Pastor of the church looked like and the funny things he said about me sleep walking in what a former Chenaniah baritone referred to as "grundles", although I can not tell you the pastor's name since that is not important to my memory of the story.

When the reunion was over, I knew it was time to immortalize these stories through the medium of print. It was time to set the record straight for God and country, but mostly for posterity. The vignettes you are about to read are the honest-to-goodness truth, so help me God! Actually, I really mean that... "help me God".

Setting The Record Straight - The First Year '82-'83

So It Begins

While it is possible that I may not have been the youngest person to join the music group, The Chenaniah Singers, there can be no doubt that I was by far its most immature member. Upon my twentieth birthday, Dan Fowle, a good friend and aspiring choir member who also had the curious distinction of being able to flex his pectoral muscles independently of each other, gave me a birthday card with the inscription, "Don't worry about growing old, you're the most immature person I know." I could not argue with his point. It was true and I had become a Chenaniah singer two years before I received that card.

Before going on an eleven week tour of the western and northern states, The Chenaniah Singers spent two weeks in an intensive music camp. Normally, this only lasted one week, but since most of the group's members were new that year, it was decided to add an extra week of preparation. This was a wise decision. I was determined and passionate about learning the music, but also about learning how to express the music.



The Chenaniah Singers VI (from right to left): Leader-Steve Paglia, Pianist-Cynthia Broome, Soprano-Diane Hansen, High Tenor-Steve Ambrose, High Soprano-Stacy Bausch, Tenor-Mike Grey, Sound Technician-Wayne Thurston, Bass/Baritone-Me, Altos-Sue Wolfe and Sheryl Hodnefield.

Once, early into music camp, we were singing and someone laughed at me for singing out of the side of my mouth. So in the privacy of my own bathroom, I began practicing singing in front of the mirror. Sometimes I would even come to practice early so that I could set up the room myself. Into the circle of chairs, I would add an extra. Detaching the mirror from above the bathroom sink, I put it on the chair that I knew would be across from me. During practice I would sing to the young man seated in that chair, i.e. the man in the mirror. I

have not heard of this method being used before I was in the group, nor have I heard of it being used since. In addition to youthfulness and immaturity, I was adding creativity and quirkiness to my repertoire.

The Singers

The Chenaniah Singers were comprised of four male and four female singers, a pianist and a sound technician. This was before the modern era of political correctness and so the sound technician was always referred to as the sound man and the pianist had to be a woman. Each singer had a partner of the opposite gender (there were only two

genders back then) and we stood in pairs. We stood closer together than unmarried people were accustomed to standing and we shared a microphone which was generally handheld. This newfound intimacy with the opposite sex was quite uncomfortable for me, but not something I found objectionable. My singing partner, Sheryl Hodnefeld, was a lovely Minnesotan of Norwegian descent. She was tall, blonde, beautiful and engaged. I had no designs on her and usually tried to be the perfect gentleman. What I lacked in maturity, I made up for in gentlemanly behavior. I knew it was a difficult summer for her as she had to spend it so far away from the man she loved, but this confused me to no end. I was having the summer of my life. We were meeting new and interesting people, seeing new and fascinating new sights, touring the country and having a great time singing in a different place each evening. There was also the endless supply of free food. After a year of scraping by with barely enough money to feed myself, I still didn't have money, but I was being fed abundantly every day. At the beginning of the summer I weighed in at 130 pounds, but by the end of the summer, my six foot frame was carrying 150 pounds. I was also seeing interesting sights and meeting interesting people.

Steve The Fearless Fastidious Leader

Our leader was a short baritone of Italian ancestry. His name was Steve Paglia and he was infinitely talented both on and off the stage. Steve could sing, speak and even do drama. I envied his mustache. He was fastidious about his personal appearance and never was there a hair out of place, regardless of whether it was growing from the top of his head or his upper lip. Steve was a good leader who guided us musically, sharpened our presentation and kept us on our spiritual toes as well. As leader, his job was also to drive the 15 passenger van that carried us. This was not Steve's forte. Sometimes I would be observing his driving and he would slowly drift closer to the right side of the road and sometimes inadvertently let his right wheels ride on the shoulder before pulling gently back into his own lane. He was not sleeping and appeared to be alert, so perhaps he was simply distracted or did not know exactly how much of the road the van took. Most of the time the singers were resting or sleeping, but I would wait until he dropped the wheels off of the road and then I would start singing the Willie Nelson song, *On The Road Again*. Steve was gracious and never told me to shut up.

Second In Command

Second in command was Diane Hansen, one of the female vocalists who was also a good piano player. She later married the former bass singer in the group and became Mrs. Todd Thielen. Diane often led the group in devotional thoughts and readings before concerts to prepare ourselves for what we were about to do on stage, and she was actually a much better driver than Steve, but had the distinct disadvantage of having been born with female chromosomes.

Grandpa Michael

Our second tenor was a tall grandfatherly figure named Michael Gray. He was actually quite young, but seemed prematurely old. He was neither inert nor languid, sluggish nor listless, yet he was still grandfatherly. Tall and thin, he smiled down at you through his grandfatherly glasses and would say something profound, "You know, I'm so glad God

created us with a system of elimination that allows us to take care of business and get right back out there to the concert!” “Yes, uh... that’s a good thing,” I replied, not really sure what to say, but knowing that I was capable of saying things that were infinitely goofier.

Michael and I were very different people. He had much more refined taste than I had at the time. For several weeks, the good people who hosted us each evening after the concerts were determined that we should have only ham sandwiches the next day. Some suspected a conspiracy, but this theory was never proven. Everybody was packing ham sandwich brown bag lunches for us as if they were being told it was all we were allowed to eat in the van. Finally one day while traveling, we began opening up our lunches and Mike could stand it no longer. “Steve,” he bellowed to the front of the van, “can we stop at a Burger King? I just can’t eat another ham sandwich!” To which I interjected, “I’ll take your ham sandwich.” I was still making up for an entire year of under-eating.

Michael was very reasonable and wise, which was why I never understood why he tried to walk out onto Coeur d’Alene Lake in Idaho by way of some logs that were chained end to end. Half way out he struggled to retain balance and ended up taking a spill into the lake fully clothed. He made it back to shore and our hilarity was dampened a bit, but only a bit when we saw his forearms scraped and bleeding from the logs.

Michael is a pastor now and I am not surprised. He was such a caring old person in his mid-twenties when I knew him. In all my five years at Southwestern College, Michael was the only one who ever confronted me with the way I was abusing my body. I drove myself hard, worked two jobs, went to college full time, sang in the school choir, and served as well as I could in my church. I subsisted on very little sleep and did not have the money and time to eat balanced meals. I had no idea how to change my situation, but it touched me deeply that Mike cared so much for me to confront me in a direct and loving way.

My Three Girls

A look back at pictures that are now 30 years old would tell me that I was a fine looking young man in college, even though at the time, all I could see were my imperfections and blemishes. I was as skinny as a starving Ethiopian but at least they could boast a protruding stomach. I imagined the mole on my cheek was the central focus of everyone’s attention if they could bring themselves to look at me. My insecurities were masked by bravado, but they were as real to me as my desire to love and to be loved.

At 17 years old, I had no idea where to go to college, until Sue Wolfe told me about Southwestern. Sue had the most beautiful eyes and endearing smile. In spite of her last name, she was no dog. Southwestern’s music program was not the best program for a young, aspiring musician, but it had something no other school had - Sue Wolfe. So when Sue told me that the music department head at the school played the same instrument I played, that was all the logic I needed to send in an application.

When Sue auditioned and was accepted as one of the Chenaniah singers, I was elated. What could be better than traveling an entire summer with someone you loved so dearly? Of course, it might have been even better to be able to travel an entire summer with someone who loved you back. There was only one problem with Sue - Mike, the man she would later marry.

There were many things I did not understand, why was Sue dating Mike when she was so obviously destined to fall in love with me. Why would Mike be worried about being separated from Sue for the summer when she was so committed to him. Immature and insecure as I was, a profound sense of honor would never have allowed me to come between them.

My two-year fascination with Sue fizzled during our summer travels and part of the reason might be linked to a summer camp flirtation with Twila Worthington of Muscatine, Iowa. I had never even heard the word before, so the very name Twila was exotic and intriguing to me. I should explain that this was not a summer camp romance like something one would see in a National Lampoon movie. We were there to sing, counsel and recruit, so there was no smooching or carrying on. It was simply a flirtatious time of getting to know each other and wishing. Cute as a button, Twila was creative, outgoing and most attractively, hilarious.

My third girl was Cynthia Broome, a great friend if ever there was one. Cindy was the pianist for our group, and remains one of the most gifted accompanists with whom I have ever had the privilege of performing. Her keyboard skills were fantastic and even better was her ability to allow the vocalist to take the lead and cover for him when he made mistakes. Famous in our group for giving great back and shoulder massages, Cindy became as close as a sister in so many ways and it was her straightforward caring and selfless friendship that helped me face some of my deepest insecurities.

Would I ever find a girl that would have beautiful eyes and a smile like Sue, be fun-loving and have the humor of Twila, and be a friend like Cynthia? Not until my fourth year of college.

Stacie, Wayne & The Goata-Skipper

In addition to having to transport the ten people who made up the Chenaniah Singers, the van was also used to transport two animals... stuffed animals. My dog, Mannie, was a white sheepdog with cartoon eyes. The only other animal owner was Stacie Bausch, a short and sassy bundle of blue-eyed energy with blonde hair the size of which has not been replicated since the early eighties. Our animals were abused mercilessly by other members of the group who inexplicably have not become felons as often happens to those who abuse animals. Our pets each had names, personalities and we would have argued they had souls. They each were kidnapped and tortured on multiple occasions.

Stacie was a soprano and we would sometimes sing impromptu duets, but never during a concert. She would start singing *You Are My Sunshine* in her mid range and I would join her with a breathy falsetto. Those were magical moments as our indistinguishable voices melted into one.

Eight singers and a pianist could not have been heard had there not been four Bose speakers, a powerful sound deck, and a technician trained to operate them. Wayne Thurston was our sound man and became a great friend. He was one of those rare individuals gifted with the ability of stretching a four-year program of study into seven years and still not graduating. Sometimes I was able to borrow his study notes from the first two or three times he had taken a class. In this way, I was always aware of how not to answer a question.

Of course, it did not really matter. Some of the professors had pegged me as a C student. On a couple occasions, I even earned a higher grade but received a lower

grade. When I questioned the professor about the discrepancy, his reply was, "You earned a B in the course, but I gave you a C because I felt you didn't grasp the material judging by your actions." When I asked if this was allowed, he merely replied that a grade is a professor's subjective analysis as to how well the student had learned the materials. He pulled out a file from his cabinet that was more than an inch thick. The file had my name on it. Inside the file he had compiled a list of a small portion of my sins. I had led music in chapel dressed in a three-piece suit while also wearing white tennis shoes. I had thrown an old Bible during an infamous chapel illustration. I had told a joke in his class to avoid falling asleep. For these sins (and many more), I had paid academically.

If the truth be known, I deserved the lower grade. Anyone who is not smart enough to know that such a perversion of the academic process could be taken to the academic dean for review, probably does not deserve to get a B grade. Still in all, I wish he had been honest with me, "You earned a B in the course, but I gave you a C because you are a complete and utter screw-up and you should thank me for not grading you even lower. I should have failed you, but quite frankly, I'm afraid you'll just take this class again and get an even lower grade!"

But what were we talking about? Ah, yes... Wayne. Wayne was a fine musician, but his vocal instrumentation was not up to the level that was required for entry into the Chenaniah Singers. This is part of what made him a perfect sound man. He had the ability to hear each individual part and to keep the group balanced and blended. His humble spirit made him a wonderful asset to the ministry. Ironically, he is one of the only members of the group who would pursue a performance career after leaving the college.

Our tenor was arguably the most colorful personality on tour this year. Gung-ho and gregarious, Steve Ambrose was one of the most disciplined members of our group. He always seemed out of place, as if he was destined for the military or even the militia. Steve was seriously muscular, but not the body-builder type of muscular. He was just plain strong and took great pride in his strength. If he had been taller, he may have modeled as a G.I. Joe.

As a matter of fact, Steve was strong in just about every way imaginable. He had strong vocals, a strong walk with the Lord, strong opinions and a strong personality. He also had a strong vocabulary enriched by words he simply made up and took great joy in pronouncing. Most of the words he made up I can no longer remember, but I shall never forget him coming into the changing room before a concert saying something like, "Hey, goat-tah skippers, get your pantah-loonies on and get out to the concert. What are you still doing in your goat-tah skivvies."

Power-chuting In Pagosa Springs

One of our stops as we traveled, was at the home of a pastor in Pagosa Springs, Colorado. He was an amazing person with a military style of family leadership. His children would line up like the Von Trapp children, then he would calmly let them know what to do. They would call him sir and his wife was ma'am. Despite his military aura, there was a fun loving side to this man as well.

He suggested that we should go power-chuting. I had never heard of it, but found out that it involves a driver, a station wagon, a parachute, two hundred feet of rope tied at

one end to the hitch of the station wagon and the other end to a parachute harness and someone dumb enough to wear the harness. Two or three other people would hold the ends of the parachute then everyone would start running at the first forward motion of the car. Within moments the parachute caught the breeze and pulled the harnessed person into the air while the vehicle sped on. It was incredible to fly one hundred and fifty feet in the air with nothing between you and the ground, but a rope. There was no above ground electric wiring in Pagosa Springs at that point in time. Many years later I saw some people doing this very same feat, but over water on a lake or ocean. Parasailing became popular in the 1990s.

This was the summer of 1982 and the word liability had not been popularized yet. People were responsible for their own actions, so when Diane landed wrong and sprained her ankle, she did not blame the pastor, sue the church nor write a complaint to OSHA. She had not only confirmed that women rarely drive, but they also should not be flying.

Sleep-Walking In Pennsylvania

Our travels that summer took us all the way from Arizona to Pennsylvania, where we arrived early at a certain church. Before singing that night, we had the opportunity to spend some time at a house of some people at the church. They cooked burgers and hotdogs on the grill while we swam in the pool with their kids. It was a warm day and Pennsylvania can be downright humid.

We had a good time getting to know the pastor who bore a striking resemblance to the famous comedian, Jerry Lewis. Moreover, this pastor had a great sense of humor. It is always disarming to a visiting group when the pastor is not afraid to be himself.

That night we went to our respective hosts and stayed in their houses. I was lucky enough to stay in the same house where we had so much fun during the daytime. They had a great room which was connected to the kitchen and only had a countertop between them. It was a great setup that enabled the wife to cook and also stay connected with the guests in the great room. On each side of the living area were bedrooms whose doors opened up to the kitchen and great room combination.

I detested making my bed then and I detest it even now at forty seven years of age. My wife says that it keeps the dust off of the sheets. "But what", I ask, "is keeping the dust off the bedspread." Making beds is simply an exercise of sheer futility. Each evening the bedspread will be peeled back and the bed will once again be unmade. It is a matter of principle. To avoid having to make the bed in the morning, I simply stretched out across the top of the bed and fall fast asleep in nothing more than my all-American, white Hanes briefs. In the morning, I got up, counted both chest hairs making sure I had not left them on the bed, straightened out the bedspread and got dressed. Breakfast was served.

As we drove away, the whole music team agreed that this had been a fun church to be at and what an enjoyable time was had. Fortunately we would see the pastor in a week's time as we were scheduled to perform at meetings he was to attend at Northwestern College in St. Paul, Minnesota.

The Revelation

From Pennsylvania, we began making our way toward Minnesota, performing concerts along the way. In St. Paul, we were able to see the pastor who had reminded me so much of one of my favorite comedians.

"Eric! I'm so glad to see you," he said.

"Good to see you too, pastor!" I replied.

The pastor continued speaking to me with the most infectious smile. "Listen. People at our church want The Chenaniah Singers to come back next year and there is already a line of people, most of them are families with teenage daughters, requesting that you stay with them."

I had no idea of why the pastor was saying this except that for some reason, I was the teen girl's favorite of that tour. I should explain. Each year, there seemed to be one person in the group who was the favorite of the teenage girl demographic. Before me, they flocked around Bruce Fisher, the blond baritone with blue eyes and a chiseled chin. I enjoyed the attention for two years and on my third year, the Chenaniah teen idol became Jimmy O'Brien, the laid-back tenor, of whom you will hear much about later in these recollections. So naturally, when the pastor was telling me about girls and coming back next year, I thought it all strange, but not inexplicable.

"Yes, all the girls at our church say they'd like to see *more* of Eric." There was something strange about the way he emphasized the word *more*. Then he stopped for a moment and paused. Looking deep within me, a slight hint of inquisitiveness could now be seen on his face, but the smile never disappeared. "Eric, you don't have any idea of what I'm talking about do you?"

"No sir, I really don't."

"Then you know nothing of sleepwalking at the Jones' house?"

"No sir, I really don't. What are you talking about?"

"Apparently at 7 a.m., you came out of your room with nothing on but your undies. You walked halfway across the great room. Mrs. Jones was in the kitchen making breakfast and saw you."

At this point in his story, I was mortified. At the tender age of 18, I was still quite modest and the thought of anybody of the opposite sex seeing me in my underwear or even being aware that I actually wore them was almost unbearable. I must have turned three shades of white, the kind of white that only terror can produce. "Oh my gosh!" I barely managed to breathe.

"It was no big deal" he continued. "She has kids of her own. When she saw you she said something like, 'You're up awful early.' You scratched your head, muttered something incoherent, turned around and walked back to your room and apparently fell asleep again."

The terror-induced whiteness of my skin now began to flush with an embarrassing shade of red. This was the age when gentlemen still blushed. While my eyes scanned the immediate surroundings looking for a hole to crawl into, the pastor, seven singers, a pianist and a sound man laughed until it hurt and the tears flowed freely from their eyes.

During my three year tenure with the singers, we never made it back to Pennsylvania again. Understandably, my traumatized soul was o.k. with that.

Setting The Record Straight - The Second Year '83-'84

My first year ended and my singing partner, Sheryl, decided to retire from the singing group and enter the bonds of matrimony. My new partner was a short, feisty brunette with an incredible soprano voice. Her name was Taci Trees. Feisty is a bit too modest a word to describe Taci who was quite spirited and always seemed to be full of energy. She could be your best friend or your worst enemy. I wondered how this year would play out since we were diametrical opposites. I was laid back, happy-go-lucky and as we discussed previously, immature. Although fun-loving, Taci was everything I was not. My concerns were in vain.

I was Taci's partner and pity the poor fool who would mess with me. It did not take long to bond and soon we found the common ground that made us great partners.

Taci was a lot shorter than Sheryl and so I had to adapt to sharing the microphone at a whole new level. What I actually mean by short is that Taci was height impaired... not in the grotesque way of being short like a Bassett Hound, but more in the cute way like a Shetland pony. Bending over to share the mic damaged my spinal cord for life. I can no longer stand straight when I sing, even when soloing.

Steve Ambrose was also back this year with his colorful assortment of words. He would use this self-imposed vocabulary to lecture us about the evil music we were listening to in the van. The New Gaither Vocal Band was all the rage that year with their contemporary gospel stylings, and someone had brought a cassette for the long hours they knew we would be traveling.

New Members

Once again we had quite a turnover of personnel in the group. I had retained my position after the auditions were over as had Steve Ambrose and Stacy Bausch. During the summer a former member, Dave Schaeffer, joined our group to run sound and sing on occasion. Dave sang tenor almost effortlessly, or at least that is how he made it



The Chenaniah Singers VII (from right to left): Baritone-Dave Buri, Alto-Melody Peterson, Soprano-Stacy Bausch, Alto-Dori Overstreet, High Tenor-Steve Ambrose, Bass-Me, High Soprano-Taci Trees, Tenor-Andy Johnson, Soprano-Debbie Clibbon, Leader/Sound Technician-David Schaeffer (Not pictured). Clarification: Taci is actually sitting in this picture. When she stood, she was slightly taller.

seem. He sang duets with his fiancée, Debbie Clibbon who had a remarkable alto voice. I loved it when Dave sang the higher part above Deb's low voice.

Aside from simply being another pretty voice, Dave, was one of the most gracious and grace-filled people I know or have ever known. It was from him I learned to give people the benefit of the doubt, a skill on which I continue to work. Dave married the girl with whom he sang duets and they are still very much in love and continue to sing together when opportunity arises.

Brand new to the Singers was Andy Johnson and Dave Buri. Andy was fun-loving and did some great Star Wars impersonations which earned my admiration. The impersonations looked really authentic when we hiked from the top of Larch mountain seven miles to the bottom of Multnomah Falls in Oregon as we were often surrounded by trees and ferns that resembled the Ewok's natural habitat. Through these imitations he also won the admiration of my singing partner. Her good opinion was not one after which he sought. In short, he thought she was a snob and rarely talked to her, but later on they began dating and eventually married.

Dave Buri was a cool-handed addition to the group. Dave was tall and good-looking with a flock of hair so blond it almost appeared white. He was incredibly comfortable on the stage and took the lead in that area. Dave, like myself, was painfully skinny even in a well-tailored three-piece suit. One day he was wearing his dark blue suit and for comfort he had put on his white tennis shoes. With white shoes, almost white blond hair, and a blue clad stick-figure body between the two, Dave resembled the world's largest Q-tip. Of course, he changed into black dress shoes for the concert, but I used my introduction as a time to poke fun of Dave and recount my observations. It was all in good fun and although I expected only a few chuckles of response, it almost brought the house down. I did the schtick a few more times and to some people Dave was remembered as the Q-tip guy. I magnanimously shared the teen-age girl demographic with Dave in a stunning display of teamwork.

There were two other singers who were new to the group, Dori Overstreet and Melody Peterson. Dori and I had gone to a western-themed banquet together and we had dressed the part to the hilt. I was wearing a ribbon bow tie and borrowed an eyebrow pencil to color in a mustache that I was embarrassingly unable to procure naturally. Dori was attired in a western hoedown dress with hoop skirt. She had a great sense of humor and in a successful attempt to shock me, she had temporarily enhanced her bosoms. I wasn't expecting this. When I picked her up, all I could say was, "Dori, you look...(pause while futilely looking for the right word)... robust."

There was a rumor that Dori and I were going to date and there were many things about Dori that I found endearing. One day, Dave Buri asked me straight out if I was interested in Dori, to which I replied, "She's a great girl, but I just don't think I could ever afford her." Dave agreed in his tactful diplomatic style. Two weeks later they were dating.

Instead, during that summer, Melody Peterson and I developed a bond that lasted a little over a year. She was a lovely lass from Prescott whose family had moved to Phoenix. For over a year she suffered under my immaturity and I suffered every cold

and flu that befell her two delightful younger siblings, Harmony and Tim, whom I sometimes called Timbre to keep the theme going. When I would visit, Melody would often call out from one of their bedrooms, "Eric, come say goodnight to Timmy. He's not feeling well." Two days later I'd be down with his cold. It was during this year, despite my frequent maladies, I learned a lesson that can not be learned in a classroom - family is important.

Camp Shetek

Our travels this summer took us to Lake Shetek in southwest Minnesota where we acted as camp counselors and special music for a week of high school youth camp. Highlights of the week included an afternoon of water and mud sliding. In the morning, staff at the camp hauled drums of water up a hill on the far side of camp and repeatedly pour them down a hill. When the hill was thoroughly saturated, the men laid down a thick roll of black plastic and that is when the fun began.

We, along with the young people at camp, made our way to the hill and began to take turns sliding down the black plastic as the men poured water and squirted dish soap on it from the top. The plastic didn't last long and soon campers and counselors were trekking back up the hills covered from head to toe with Minnesota mud. I inquired as to why the mud was accompanied with certain bathroom odors. An experienced maintenance man informed me there had been an outhouse at the bottom of the hill some fifteen years previous. Whenever the mud got wet and was stirred up, the smell surfaced again. He said there was no sanitary threat and nobody else seemed bothered by the odor, so we kept mudding it up.

Up A Tree With No Paddle

Barely out of high school myself and still sporting the face of a fourteen year old, counseling a group of high schoolers was a responsibility for which I wasn't ready. There were things I simply did not know nor understand. For example, I still believed the point of hide-n-go-seek was to not get caught. During the last night of camp, we played a game of hide and seek referred to as the counselor hunt. Counselors hid and the campers looked for them.

The camp was landscaped with tall, thin poplar trees. I found one and climbed to a position near the top. From this lofty position, I was able to observe the teenagers as they used their flashlights to find the counselors and bring them back to the common area. Some of the teenage boys began to lose interest in the game and went to their cabins to get contraband they had brought to camp. This consisted mostly of fireworks in the form of bottle rockets which they found amusing to ignite only twenty feet away from the tree in which I was hiding. Some of the rockets were bursting just a few feet from my head and with each burst of fire my heart pounded heavier. I wanted to bust them for their crimes or make the hooligans go somewhere else, but that would have meant revealing myself. In spite of the danger and the fear, I had a game to win.

Years later while directing a summer day camp in California, we played hide and seek with the kids and I made sure the counselors knew their job was to be found.

It's Raining Man

This was the year I realized that being funny was a dangerous sport. We were in New Mexico and the hideous 15-passenger van we traveled in had chosen to break down in a hot and dusty town so small we had to wait under a nearby tree while the only mechanic within miles worked on the problem.

The van was a lemon. We even had to push it over the top of a couple mountainous passes. It had broken down in many places already, but this was by far the most remote location. There were no cafe's, libraries or department stores in which to pass the time.

Unaccustomed to boredom, I began to think of interesting things to do. I settled on the idea of scaring my singing partner. Taci was sitting on the ground on the edge of the shade far away from the tree trunk. The closest branch over her head was about six feet above the ground. My plan was to climb the tree, shimmy down that branch by hanging on with both feet and hands until I was on the branch directly over her. Though I wasn't sure what I would do once I had stealthily accomplished this feat, I knew it would be easy to figure out once I was there. Maybe I would tap her on the shoulder and make her look around without seeing anyone, or maybe I would mess with her hair and make her think a spider had fallen out of the tree.

Quietly climbing the tree, I grabbed onto the solid branch with both hands and then wrapped my legs around it as well. In this upside down position, I began to shimmy my way toward the end of the branch, placing my right hand and right leg in front of the other and then repeated the motion with my left hand and leg. I was achieving complete stealth and was almost to my target, until the unexpected occurred.

Grabbing on to a smaller branch to get closer to Taci, I had inadvertently put my trust in a piece of wood that had been dead for quite some time. It had the appearance of a strong connection to the main branch, but alas, it was only an appearance. I found myself falling to the ground at the speed of gravity and with a magnificent thud I landed flat on my back directly behind the one whom I was attempting to scare. The wind was knocked out of my chest and almost immediately I was surrounded by faces staring down at me.

"Are you alright?" they asked with looks of grave concern.

"Yes," I gasped barely audible.

"What were you trying to do?" someone asked.

"Scare Taci," I breathed.

"Mission accomplished!" the feisty brunette replied.

Setting The Record Straight - The Third Year '84-'85

Jimmy And The Puddle

Fortunately, after a two year reign as the Chenaniah Singers lead screw-up, I was able to relinquish this title to my good friend Jimmy. Actually, the question of who was the biggest screw-up was a matter of conjecture. However, for purposes of this chapter I yield the title.

James was from Prescott, Arizona, which is one of those places where the residents pride themselves on mispronouncing the name of the city so as to be able to distinguish between real residents and those who have the misfortune of being from somewhere else. People from this town are genuinely easy-going, good hearted people until you pronounce the word Prescott correctly as in "Press Scott". The proper way to mispronounce the name is to say "Prscit" (Like forming the "Pr" sound and adding the "scuit" from the word biscuit).

He was fresh out of high school when he began traveling with the Singers and this made him the youngest to ever join the group. This immediately threw him into the position of favored status within the teen-age girl demographic. Even though he had a girlfriend back home in that famously mispronounced Arizona town, he could usually be found after the concert in the lobby of the church surrounded by teenage girls who had still not made that final decision about which college to attend. Many would go home wondering what it was like to attend the same college as the dreamy tenor who had come to their church and amazed them with his passionate tenor voice. Jimmy was the consummate recruiter, which was an easier task for him since he had not actually attended the school yet.

Even now, 26 years later, the mere mention of my friend's name brings a smile to my face. There is one particular story that explains why. While I remember this story, I don't remember it like Jimmy does. So I wrote to him and asked if he would recount the story for me and anybody who might want to read these recollections:

"It was a dark and stormy day! We were heading from Washington to Montana and had to travel through a heavy rainstorm on our way. In spite of that, we made good time and arrived at our destination in the town of Clyde Park at the expected time. We checked the layout of the worship center, and ate an early dinner with our hosts who seemed a bit nervous and kept glancing at their watches. We then began unpacking our gear. At this point, we discovered there had been a leak in the roof of the trailer and we had brought a sizable portion of the rain with us! There were several inches of water on the floor of the trailer that contained all of our sound equipment as well as our concert clothing. Thankfully most of the equipment was well sealed in containers and almost all the clothing was hanging, i.e. all except one home-fashioned suit bag. Since I was preparing for college, I could not spare the funds for a standard suit bag, so I was using a duct taped garbage bag. It was lying submerged in the pool of water on the trailer floor!

Upon discovering that all of my suits for the concert that evening were completely saturated with water, our group leader sought out one of the members of the church to ask if there might be a one-hour dry cleaning business nearby where we could take the suits to get them dried out quickly and properly.

"Well, no there isn't," replied our host with a confused look on his face, "but you don't have time for that anyway".

"I know it would be cutting it close," said Dave, "but we do have an hour and fifteen minutes before the concert starts."

"No", the gentleman answered, "you have fifteen minutes!"

"But, it's only 4:45!?"

"No, it's 5:45!"

We had not taken into account the time zone change we had driven through and now we had 15 minutes to set up all the sound and multimedia equipment and get dressed!

We jumped into action! With a fury, the guys set up the equipment while the girls assembled the media presentations and headed back to the dressing rooms to change into concert clothes. It was a true test of our road experience and our ability to function as team.

We had two strong motto's. 1. 'Unless you're in the ambulance, hospital or grave - sing.' 2. 'Don't do anything to distract from the message you are delivering.' I felt that being in street clothes while everyone else was dressed up would be a distraction throughout the concert. So I took a deep breath and put on my suit even though it was dripping wet. Since the dark suit was uniformly wet, the wetness was not really visible to the untrained eye. Amazingly, we proceeded out on stage to begin our concert at 6:05pm.

After singing a song, we began our introductions. I thought it would be a good idea to lightly explain my situation to the audience. Somehow, I thought that would make the situation less distracting, so I had been trying hard to think of a clever way to do so."

As the author and one of the only people who have ever called Jim "Jimmy", I feel the need to interrupt my pal's otherwise self-aware story. It should be noted that Jimmy was endearing, intelligent, friendly, caring, talented, honest, fun-loving and a host of many other great adjectives, but that list would not include the word clever as he was about to demonstrate:

"I began as usual, 'Hello, my name Jim O'Brien and I am from Prescott, AZ.' I then proceeded with my explanation, 'I know that those of you who are sitting closer to the front may have noticed this already, but for those who are farther back, I thought I should let you know that right now ***I am leaving a puddle on your stage.***'



Smiles turn to looks of horror. Jaws dropped. Eyes opened wide as saucers as the audience began to imagine what I was doing up there.

The entire singing group broke out into laughter. I suddenly realized the word picture I had created and started thinking of what I might say to dig myself out of this hole, but it was too late! They were laughing so hard that no one could formulate the words for the next introduction. Since no one else could speak, I attempted to continue, 'that wasn't what I meant' was all I got out. The entire group was now laughing so hard they could barely breathe. Our sound man, Jeff Durham, appeared to have fallen off his chair behind the mixer. While the audience still did not know the whole story, they began laughing with us. Still, no one in the group could put more than couple words together without laughing harder, so I attempted again to move us forward, 'but seriously', was as much as I could say, before everyone laughed even harder. This time the audience was fully enjoying my unintended comic relief and they too were laughing harder every time I opened my mouth.

It literally took several minutes before anyone in the group could continue with the introductions and give full explanation of what had happened to us on that trip.

However accidental, this turned the evening into a lasting memory - not only for us, but also for the people at that little church in Clyde Park, Montana. I returned there several times over the next few years. Each time I was asked by many of the church members if I remembered to bring dry suits with me for the concert."

Home Sweet Pig Farm

Our travels this summer took us once again to the Hodnefield's Minnesota pig farm - home to as many as 1,200 swine at any given time. The Hodnefield's were excellent hosts with whom we could let down our hair and be ourselves... even if we went hog-wild (an irresistibly gratuitous pun) Having lived my life in the suburbs of rather large cities, I found every aspect of farm life fascinating. Several concerts had been scheduled at nearby churches allowing us to spend several days in one place. No matter where we spent the night, our days were spent at the farm.

There was always so much to do at the farm. In addition to their daughter, Sheryl, who was my first partner after I joined the group, the Hodnefields had three sons. We became good friends with the two youngest, Phil and Steve. I spent a fare amount of time with Steve who was eager to show me the farm. Climbing up to the top of the silo, he opened it to show me all the grain and advised me against falling in or other activities which might lead to my early demise.

Farm toys included tractors and four-wheel all terrain motorbikes. There were lots of animals, both domestic and wild. If we got tired of watching the pigs, we could look for raccoons and skunks.

Pig Rides

At the pig farm, there is a pig pen in which one very lucky boar is chosen to service the maternal instincts of about twenty sows. What I mean is that his job is to impregnate them. These sows-in-waiting are kept in a separate pen and are fed all at the same

time. "Come with me," Steve said one day while holding a pale of feed. I followed him to go feed the breeders.

"You ever ridden one of them?" Steve coolly asked.

"Never," I replied.

"Watch," he continued. "I'm going to throw this feed in the middle and they will be so focused on their food that I can approach them from behind and jump on one of their backs."

Steve did just as he said and within a couple seconds the sow had bucked this tall lad right off. Steve was too big or tall I figured. So I jumped in and did the same thing. However, I did not even last as long as Steve had on his bronco. We tried riding a couple more times and then left these even-toed ungulates to finish their meal.

Where's The Puddle?

The Hodnefield's had a four-wheel ATV that I was sure they owned for our driving pleasure. We were not allowed to drive these on the road as by definition they are off-road vehicles. What a hoot it was to drive them around the farm and on unpaved farm roads.

Our sound man, Jeff Durham, and I got on the ATV and were taking turns driving. Jeff was steady and controlled in his driving. It was fun as it always is when you are riding an ATV. Yet the element of danger was missing. I loved to test the limits and had not reached the level of maturity where I could understand that driving sanely is the sign of a good driver. Was I adventurous or reckless? And where is the fine line between the two?

Now it was my turn to drive, so with Jeff on the back of the bike, I crossed the street in front of the Hodnefield's farm house and began to drive parallel to the road, being careful not to go into the cornfield while staying off the road. Back and forth a couple times we drove the length of the field being careful to skirt the muddy edge of a puddle that was in our way.

Then I threw caution to the wind. Why was I driving this bike as if I was afraid of getting a bit muddy?! Haven't I seen commercials of people who ride motorcycles off-road and get completely mud covered? Am I worse than those people? What would Mr. Lanning say? I could hear his voice in my head, "C'mon Eric... be a man!"

So I opened up the throttle and headed straight for the mud puddle.

"Eric, what are you doing? Eric, slow down! Eric go around the puddle!" Jeff's wise counsel was spurned as we drove straight through the thickest and deepest part of the puddle. Mud was flying everywhere.

At the end of the path, I turned the bike around and did the very same thing, but this time going the other direction. I heard Jeff's plea over my shoulder, "Yodis don't do it." I took his suggestion into consideration as we zoomed through the mud puddle again. On the third go-around, Jeff buried his head into my back in a vain attempt to stay clean.

Three times seemed like enough torture for my rider, and so I decided to show mercy. Besides, on one of the trips through the mud I had clipped a metal culvert with a foot peg and bent the peg a bit. I felt badly about that, and it was time to confess the damage and get cleaned up.

Parking the bike on the dirt and gravel driveway, we walked to the front door of the farm house where we were met by Steve's stocky older brother, Phil.

“What happened to you two?” Phil inquired.

“Yodis drove us thr...” Jeff obviously was trying to play the blame game. “We rode through a puddle” I interrupted.

“Puddle? What puddle? There aren’t any puddles around here.” Phil was still trying to understand what could have happened to us.

“Sure you do. Right across the street!” I refreshed his memory.

“Oh yes. I see.” A smirky kind of smile was forming on Phil’s face. “That’s no puddle. That’s where we pump our sewage. I’ll go get you some towels.”

On a farm where over a thousand pigs are being raised, odors can often be masked. After farmer Phil’s pronouncement, we began to realize that what we were smelling was not actually coming from the direction of the pig-shed.

Someone Else’s Ride

It was the second night of our stay at the Hodnefield’s farm and this evening we were scheduled to sing at their home church. After our first song was over, everyone began their own introduction as was our custom. When it was my turn to introduce myself, I began by saying, “Hello, my name is Eric and I’m from Glendale, Arizona. I’m a third year student at Southwestern majoring in Church Music.”

Now, I should have done the prudent thing and stopped talking, but I did not. In retrospect, there is plenty of evidence that I may have been less clever than my buddy Jimmy. Alas, it is a dangerous thing for a man who is “not so clever”, to believe he is “oh so clever”. So I continued my monologue. “It has been such a treat for this city boy to be visiting with you and enjoying the Hodnefield’s hospitality and their farm. Why in the last couple days, I’ve been able to do many things I would never have been able to do in the city. Things such as climbing to the top of a silo, driving a four-wheel motorcycle right through an open sewer puddle, and of course, riding the sows.”

There was laughter and I must confess, it was more than I deserved. Everybody has moments when they think they say something funny, but the response is not congruent with the quality of the humor. If the joke is a dud and you think it was great, you are disappointed. If the anecdote wasn’t intended to bring the house down and yet you get a healthy round of laughter, you tend to think something is wrong with the listener. I knew what I said had an element of humor, but perhaps these simple people of the land just don’t get out very much.

Judy Hodnefield is the perfect example of a classy farmer’s wife. She was a lovely lady who was stately and refined, yet hardy and hard working. Truly a wonderful woman. “Eric,” she began inquisitively after the concert was over, “Did you notice anybody laughing during your introduction?”

“Yes, ma’am. Perhaps too much.” I replied. “I was trying to keep it light, but didn’t think I was that funny.”

“Well, I just wanted to tell you because you might want to change your introduction in future concerts.” She looked rather uneasy. Hesitatingly and in hushed tones the genteel one continued, “You see, ‘riding the sows’ is what the farmers say the boar does.”

Council Bluffs And The Pastor From Hell

We were scheduled to perform a weeknight concert at a church in Council Bluffs, Iowa, that would begin an eighteen-hour debacle which would live in Chenaniah infamy. These stories have been retold so many times that even members of the singing group who weren't there tell them as if they were there and sometimes even manage to interject themselves into the story. This is another reason, why it is important to set the record straight.

Having arrived at the church, we began to realize there was little to no preparation for our arrival. We let ourselves into the church and began to explore the layout of the sanctuary. Our ambitious second tenor, Rob Hendricks, took to warming up his vocal chords by the piano. Rob was not the most talented member of the group, but what he lacked in natural giftedness, he made up for in discipline and drive. I do not think there was anybody that year who worked harder to earn his spot on the team than he did. Naturally, when the pastor arrived and wondered out loud who was dying in the front of the auditorium, we thought such cynicism and biting sarcasm was unnecessary. Of course, we were too polite to rebuff this man of the cloth. Little did we know that this seemingly insignificant insult would set the tone for our entire visit.

It seemed very difficult for us to minister in top form here. There was a gloominess that seemed to have overtaken the church which often happens when a pastor attempts to lead without the grace that comes from a joyful and grateful heart. Our concert was varied with different styles of song. Some were emotional and uplifting while others were just plain fun. When a few people deemed it necessary to express themselves with applause, their clapping was silenced by an immediate turn around by the pastor who was sitting in the front row. The icy cold glare in his eyes and the evil expression of his countenance was sufficient to silently say, "There will be no worldly glory given to these humble young people! So help me Gaaawwwwd!" This gloominess weighed on us throughout the evening until after the concert when we spotted the fireflies.

Fireflies

In all my years living in Arizona, I had never seen a firefly. I knew they existed because I had seen them on the television, read about them in books, and because I had a vague recollection of them from the first six years of my life which had been spent in Pennsylvania. It was not surprising therefore that when we saw these wonders of nature begin lighting up in the air above the lawn of the church, we began to chase and capture them. Holding one cupped in our hands, we would watch close as the creature lit up like a little green nightlight.

Since that time I have wondered what people were thinking as they watched five fully grown young men, dressed to the hilt in dark blue pinstriped, three-piece suits, flitting about the lawn and waving their arms around like a bunch of Neverland Tinkerbells.

An Embarrassing Problem

When you are cooped up in a van all Summer long with nine other people, tension has to be released and often this takes the form of practical jokes. We looked for ways of having fun at each other's expense. Some of us had boundaries, but I'm not sure which one of us that would have been.

So, after the concert at the church in Council Bluffs, we gathered around the trailer that held our luggage. Each of us had a suitcase and it was tradition for the gentlemen in the

group to load the girl's luggage into their host's vehicle. As the van was being unloaded, I asked one lovely host couple if I could talk to them privately for a moment. They were probably 60 - 65 years old and some of the sweetest people on earth, despite the sarcastic and cynical personality of the pastor.

"I've been given the task of helping one of the girls in the group that has a little bit of a problem," I explained as I made myself out to be a hero for undertaking an unpleasant responsibility. "It is quite embarrassing for her as you can imagine, so I need to ask you if you have any plastic sheets you can put on her bed tonight."

To this day, I am amazed I was able to maintain a straight face.

"We don't have any plastic sheets," the gracious lady said as she pondered other alternatives, "Would a plastic table cloth do?"

"I'm sure that'll do fine," I reassured her. Inwardly I was relishing the moment and still maintaining a straight face.

"Which girl is it?" one of the two people standing before me inquired.

At this point, I faced a dilemma. I had to choose between one of three lovely blue-eyed blonds. Would it be Nancy Clark - the beautiful soprano who was as tall as I was and could most likely throttle me without regret? Should I choose Dori Overstreet - the sharp-witted girl who would most likely exact an equally embarrassing revenge? Or would it be Melody Peterson whom I was dating at the time and with whom a practical joke of this nature would certainly land me in the proverbial doghouse? It took only a fraction of a second to weigh all the options, and then I made my choice.

"Her name is Melody. She is a very sweet girl and I know you'll like her very much." Then throwing caution to the wind, I added, "Oh, and don't let her have anything to drink after 9:30."

In Bed With The Pastor

The church was not prepared for our visit and a dwindling congregation was ill equipped to host all ten of us on short notice, but the pastor, as calloused as he came across, was gracious enough to take three of us guys into his home for the night as he had two spare rooms of which we made avail. His home was a reflection of the man that ruled it as his wife scurried around making sure everyone was as comfortable as could be. His house seemed dark and lifeless, devoid of joy and happiness. There was little that made us feel welcome and yet the beds were soft and we knew it was only for a night.

After the pastor's wife had shown us our quarters for the evening, we were each designated a towel set for bathing. We decided that Jeff Durham, the oldest of us would get his own room and that Jimmy O'Brien and I would share a room. Jimmy's real name is James, and at first I called him Jim. After hearing his syrupy girlfriend call him Jimmy, I began calling him Jimmy also and what started as light hearted teasing, became a term of endearment. He returned the favor by calling me Buddy-buddy. Today Pastor Jim is a respected worship minister at a respectable church in California, but he is still Jimmy to me and my wife.

We sat in Jeff's room for a while and talked quietly about the evening. Jeff was a sharp guy, perhaps even wily. He had a thin mustache and looked as if he had stepped out of a western movie. Jimmy also looked like a movie cowboy, but more like the one you would have seen in the movie Toy Story. He was probably the only other male in the

group that may have been as clueless as I was, and this may have been the reason we had bonded so well.

Conversation came to an end and it was time to head to our rooms, but first I would take a fateful trip to the bathroom while Jimmy readied himself for sleeping. I will never know when it was that I lost my sense of direction in this dark house. Maybe it was while I looked for the restroom, or perhaps it was during the time in which I was tending to my hygiene. When I came out and headed down the dark corridor toward the room where I was to spend the night, all the doors looked the same.

Stopping outside of Jeff's door, I could see that he had already turned the light off and was obviously getting close to sleep... maybe even sleeping. I wanted to do something funny and surprise Jeff at the same time. I mapped out a plan that would involve me quickly opening the door, running in, jumping on his bed, screaming in a whisper voice "GOODNIGHT JEFF!" and perhaps for good measure, I would drill my fist into his chest in a circular motion to thoroughly fluster him. But wait! Should I turn the light on or just leave it off? I decided to turn the light on as I ran in to heighten the element of surprise, but with the light on, speed would be essential.

What happened in the next few seconds has gone down in Chenaniah folklore. It is the stuff of which legends are made. It may be the most repeated story in the 50 year history of the school that has now become known as Arizona Christian University. Past presidents of the school wish it had been a story of their great accomplishments. Coaches regret they have no miraculous underdog comeback story that continues to echo through the halls of this esteemed academic institution. The entire history and reputation of the school hinges on a story that began in a state half a country away, because of a screw-up they had trusted to represent the school to its public. Now back to our story...

Having completed my planning, I grabbed the handle of the door and turned it. With the speed of youth, I pushed open the door, flipped the light switch on with the other hand and had already made it most of the way to the bed when the pastor leaned up in bed and with a booming bass voice commanded, "What's your problem?!!!"

I suddenly saw not one, but two big lumps in the bed from which I was only two steps away. I stopped dead in my tracks. My eyes grew large. My face turned white. I stammered, "I..I..I thought... this... I thought this was... I..I..I'm sorry... I'm so sorry..." Instinctively my hands went to the sides of my head, holding my cheeks as feelings of abject horror seized every fiber of my being. I was already backing out of the room, turning off the light and shutting the door as I said my last "Sorry".

In the hallway with the door shut, my horror began to find its expression in sheer embarrassment and the cheek that I was still holding flushed with a burning glow. I could feel the heat and knew that I had just committed a grievous social faux pas of historic and monumental proportions. I needed company. I needed encouragement.

On the other side of the hallway, I saw a door that looked familiar. This time I slowly turned the handle and slowly opened the door. Jeff was under the covers facing the far side of the bed. He did not move and so I walked in slowly, shut the door, and laid down on the bed parallel to him facing the opposite direction. Still in shock, I did not say a word.

"Eric?" said Jeff.

"Yeah" was all I could muster.

"Tell me you didn't," he probed still facing the far wall.

"Jeff..." I paused as I gathered myself together. "I did."

Jeff was not much older than me, but much more aware. He knew not to add insult to injury by laughing out loud within earshot of a pastor whose privacy had just been violated. However, the bed began to shake. It began slowly at first but then gained momentum. He clasped his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud, but make no mistake... he was having an outright fit of uncontrollable laughter.

The more Jeff laughed, the more I began to see the humor in the situation. It would be a little while longer before I could actually laugh at this story, but seeing how much Jeff was enjoying himself took the sting off my embarrassment. Jeff would compose himself, ask a question or two about the happening, and then go back to holding his mouth closed and shaking again. Eventually I found my room, confessed my sin to Jimmy, and he spent most of the night laughing.

The Morning After

We did not sleep much that night, but in the morning awoke in time to clean up a bit before breakfast. Jeff was the first to the table and must have spoken to the pastor about the night before, because when I came to the dining room with head hung low, the pastor simply said something to the effect of "I heard you got the rooms mixed up last night." "Yes, sir" was all I could say.

That was it, the subject was dropped. Could it be he was letting me off the hook so easily? I was quietly elated that no charges would be leveled against me and there would be no more explaining for such an embarrassing event. Of course, I still had not grasped how viral this story would become.

I was feeling so much relief, until Jimmy showed up for breakfast a few seconds later.

Britch-less at Breakfast

Jeff and I were standing with the Pastor just inside the dining room chatting when Jimmy showed up for breakfast. He was wearing a t-shirt and a pair of shorts. From the neck up he looked like Woody the cowboy doll after a night of little sleep from telling stories and laughing with Bud Lightyear. Actually, since Woody is made of plastic, he probably would not have had bed-head and puffy eyes. To say that Jimmy was fully awake may have been a stretch of the imagination, but he definitely was vertical, standing on his own two bare feet (a fact that made his shorts look much shorter and his legs even whiter) and moving by his own effort and energy.

To be absolutely clear on the matter, it should be noted that Jimmy's shorts were not boxers, bermudas, bikers, or briefs. They were simply shorts. The kind you might wear outside your house or to church these days, but not to the mall.

The pastor looked Jimmy up and down. Then with the same stern face he took with him wherever he went he said, "Young man, in this house we come to the table in britches."

The entire line had somehow gotten past my buddy. Jeff and I knew that the pastor was not simply telling us about his family history, but was actually making a veiled request for his guest to go put some long pants on before sitting down for a meal. The other option of skipping breakfast was understood as well.

At first, Jimmy seemed oblivious to this subtle and indirect approach the pastor had suddenly put into practice which he may have just learned from anger management classes. Regardless, it was obvious our shorts-clad friend had neither heard nor understood the request that was being made. Perhaps he simply was trying to figure out how to apply this piece of information into his daily life.

The brithless one looked up and upon seeing the expression on our faces knew that he had missed something. The pastor repeated the history of his family's approach to the dining table one more time.

As Jimmy went back to the room to scrounge up some long pants to put on, I prayed, "Dear God in heaven, what else is going to go wrong here?!"

Our Hats Are Off And So Are We

After breakfast, we met at the church and began packing the sound equipment and luggage into the enclosed trailer we lugged behind the van. Things seemed a bit tense as three of the girls muttered in passing, "You are so dead!" "What jokers!" I mused in my usual clueless manner. The previous evening, their hostess had approached two of the young ladies as they were tending to their laundry. She was carrying carefully folded plastic table cloths and as she approached, she simply asked, "I'm sorry, who is the one who needs a little extra help?"

Finally, we all got into the van, prayed and Dave Buri began driving us away from this hotbed of humiliation. Upon driving a couple miles away from the church, someone shouted from the rear of the van, "Dave, we left the cowboy hat props in the choir loft!" Dave turned his head and looked at the rest of us as if to say, "What should we do?" Seeing the look of terror in our eyes, he turned his head back to the road and pushed the gas pedal to the floor. We all knew there was no turning back.

In Closing

There are many people who contributed to the process of my personal development and maturation. I would like to thank all of them, but that would be a long and boring book. You know who you are and if you do not know, you will most likely find out in heaven. All the same, I am grateful for every single member of the Chenaniah singers from whom I learned so much and whose friendship through the years has been the gift that keeps on giving. I am thankful to each faculty member of this shockingly small, but surprisingly influential institution of higher academic education for their examples both positive and maybe not-so-positive.

However, all the gratefulness of the previous paragraph pales in comparison to the gratefulness I have and want to express to our Lord Jesus, to the Father and to the Holy Spirit for His grace and mercy and all He has done for me. At times, I shudder to think what would life have been like... would I have turned to a life of crime, destitution, drugs, insanity and the like, if God had not put it into my head, to turn the bedroom light on before jumping into bed with a pastor and his wife, and drilling my fists into their chests.