
Silent Sanctuary: Growing Up in Kansas

by Kent Seltman

A plume of dust, like the tail of a comet, rose from behind every car to signal its approach on our country roads. Every mile at the crossroad, I helped Dad look for dust plumes. Cars weren't easy to see, for the roads, without cuts and fills, clung closely to the shape of the gentle prairie hills. And every Sabbath morning, about 15 dusty comets approached our Sabbath home.

From the south came eleven Fords; from the north two Chevys and two Fords—we thought that Chevy owners might just get to heaven, but driving a modest Ford—especially a custom sedan, was a safer bet. Oldsmobiles and Buicks were like golden calves or jewelry worn sinfully for show. Mercurys presented a problem we could not solve—they were almost Fords.

If we got there first, I rushed for the bent, rusty nail stuck in the siding above the back door, and quickly picked the lock into the Sabbath school room where we kept the keys. Then I waited for my family to arrive—my grandpa, my aunts, my uncles, and my cousins.

It was a clean and silent world in which I waited. It was a clean and silent church in which I waited too. A world this pure seemed permanent though everyone said, "We are biding here for just a little time."

And I kept coming home. Every Sabbath for 18 years. Every vacation and summer through college and graduate school. Then with my wife

and family from the edges of the continent for annual vacations. For more than 40 years I raised a ribbon of Sabbath dust. But time ran out.

The church was a sentinel. It signaled God to farms for miles around from its prominence atop a prairie hill. The design was classic—a white frame rectangular box with a pointed steeple soaring above a bell tower. In fact, with red maples, a rushing brook, and whitewashed village, it could have posed for a New England calendar. Instead, it hung alone onto the dry, rocky hilltop. We didn't ring the bell, for no one lived in earshot. It was landscaped by a single evergreen tree on the north side of the entrance where the shade cooled and the church itself protected the tree from the blazing summer winds that killed one mate after another—trees planted by devoted members committed to aesthetic balance.

The church had no water—not even a well. Model mothers brought a thermos of ice water on hot summer days. The toilets—by no stretch of the imagination "rest rooms"—stood to the west of the church at a distance that became a gauntlet run by several bewildered new preacher's wives to the scatological delight of the prepubescent males.

This house of God symbolized the virtues of an earlier day, before pollution, before bomb shelters, before Elvis, before Marilyn Monroe. It represented the values of our grandfathers who had built it in the good-old-days before electricity, before bathrooms and septic tanks, before air conditioning—those days when each boy had a horse to ride whenever he wanted, when our dads hunted and trapped all winter for spending money, when God's bounty on the prairie promised riches to those who worked.

Kent Seltman, who graduated from Union College and received his Ph.D. from the University of Nebraska, was an English professor at Columbia Union College and Pacific Union College for 19 years. He is now the administrative director of the Loma Linda International Heart Institute at Loma Linda University Medical Center.

The church itself seemed old—like our parents and our aunts when they turned age 30. Up close, the clapboards, painted and repainted over cracked earlier coats, resembled the pure white wrinkled skin that old saints must have. The ornate, pressed tin on the high vaulted ceiling was old-fashioned, like Grandpa’s high-topped Sabbath shoes or the ceilings in drugstores that had real soda fountains and marble-topped counters with high round stools that twirled around. Perhaps that’s why in the 1950s the church took a step toward the modern—the ceiling was lowered with flat acoustical tiles hiding the vaulted tin.

In reality, the church was young. While three generations worshiped together, the church itself was less than a generation old. Our grandparents had joined in their twenties and thirties when our parents were children and adolescents. We were the first generation truly raised in the Truth—or the Truth as it had filtered down to our parents through sermons, a short-lived church school, and the boarding academy. And the stories our parents told about their antics in academy suggested that the agrarian culture might there have won over the Christian.

My father recounted that cows from the dairy sometimes “found” their way up the stairs to the second floor of the academy’s administration building. Then there was the dark winter evening that he and a friend hid in the ditches of a road and pulled, with an invisible string, a white sheet across the road in front of a freshman boy who was already scared of the dark. Tricks and pranks apparently absorbed the creative energies of the academy youngsters.

The Truth we knew provided fried chicken and roast beef at church potlucks—much to the chagrin of those poor new preacher’s wives who filled their plates thinking that only sanctified food made it to church dinners. The Truth we knew provided baseball and basketball games with the cousins on Sabbath afternoons while our parents celebrated Sabbath rest. The Truth we knew provided Weeks of Prayer read for seven weary nights right out of *The Review and Herald* by farmers and their wives who had practiced the reading. Then, in the sanctuary lighted dimly by gasoline lanterns hung from the high ceiling on

long copper poles, followed the testimony service. Farmers, their wives, and children gave ritual testimonies. The service demanded speech, but the familiar words observed a higher principle of silence.

Sometimes our Truth included theological talk. In any of these discussions, however, “Common Sense” always triumphed over the “educated” adversary. Of course there was a Flood; we found shark-tooth and sea-shell fossils in the rocks in our fields and pastures more than a

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thousand miles from the nearest ocean. And it didn’t make any sense that God would want to save someone who might end up not being happy in a perfect heaven. So, we tried to live as perfect saints in Kansas to check it out.

Our Truth didn’t really include Ellen White, who was the province of the preachers and aunts who wore wool underwear and ate health food. I guess we always felt they were a little better than we were, but the rest of us didn’t covet their lives. Without a church school to help our generation understand, Ellen White was just a name, not really a presence.

Typically a couple of her books, beginning with *Patriarchs and Prophets*, found their way to our bookshelf through my generation’s academy Bible classes. Our parents, who lived the principle of hard work, didn’t quit work on the farm in order to come home and read in the evening. They came home to sleep, so Ellen White came into our lives through preachers and subtle cultural means—quite often a gentle hint or bits and pieces of overheard conversation. This eventually led to Friday afternoon shoe shines, to salt-shakers only on dinner tables set for preachers and certain aunts, to bicycle races and makeshift rodeos—boys will be boys—instead of ball games on Sabbath afternoon, and vegetarian—often experi-

mental vegetarian—casseroles at church pot-lucks.

At the center of our Truth stood Sabbath, the symbol that separated us from the neighbors. And Sabbath was a sanctuary from hard work. Some fathers read newspapers and listened to the radio news—as well as the World Series—on Sabbath. Others wouldn't read or listen to the radio themselves, but instead, would call their non-Adventist neighbors to get the news and baseball scores. Some would go on a Sabbath afternoon ride and end up in town right at sundown.

But *no one* worked hard on Sabbath. We milked and fed the cows. We gathered eggs and fed and watered the chickens. But we did not work the land, and this we felt put us a step above our other Christian neighbors. We didn't plow, plant, or, most significantly, harvest on The Sab-

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bath. The Methodists, Lutherans, Catholics, and Baptists in our neighborhood wouldn't plow or plant on their Sunday Sabbath, but harvest was another thing. Harvest was the farmer's great temptation, for the fruit of an entire year's labor stood on fragile, ripened straw almost daring a devastating wind or hailstorm. Sabbathkeeping in harvest time was our greatest act of faith.

There were two grandpas in our church—my grandpa and Grandpa Frick, who was the patriarch for the other family in our two-family church. They were both very old, and in my earliest years sat with our grandmas behind one another next to the aisle on the second and third rows of the north side of the church. But after two sad funerals, where we all cried, they sat in their customary pews alone.

Grandpa Frick was short, angular, clean-shaven, and trim. He wore wire-rim glasses, and

a healthy shock of gray hair topped his head. My bald-headed Grandpa Seltman was short, a bit chubby, but very strong. Grandpa Seltman had plowed under his briar pipe and tobacco pouch.

Without a knowledge of their youth, we knew them as saints—taciturn old men who prayed their prayers in German. These survivors of the Great Depression were men of principle. Men who wore high-top black leather shoes with laces, and their only three-piece wool suit to church each Sabbath.

And the coats stayed on, even in the searing summer heat that wilted crops and sometimes turned them brown. The coat was a principle. Prayers in German were a principle, and the preacher's German had to measure up. Attending church every Sabbath was a principle too, though by generous example, we knew that sleeping through the sermon didn't violate anything. In fact, it supported the next to the highest principle of all—hard work. Sabbath was literally a day of rest. Our grandpas deserved to sleep.

But the highest principle of all was reserved for silence. This was not quiet-silence in the holy sanctuary. In fact, we frequently admonished one another from the Sabbath school pulpit about reverence in the House of the Lord. This was even the one and only time that Catholics were mentioned in a positive light—their reverence shone as an example. But reverence for family and friendship won out over reverence for holy silence every Sabbath. Before, after, and in between services everyone talked and talked loudly in order to be heard.

Actually, the silence principle was related more to friends and family than to any articulated theological principle. Silence shielded us from the foibles of family and the sins of our friends. Silence hid from us the feelings of our grandpas and grandmas, our fathers and mothers, our aunts and uncles, our brothers and sisters in blood and in Christ.

Our church was a child's dream. Not a dream of sugarplum fairies or carnival thrills. Not a dream of exotic places or riches. Rather a dream of security, confidence, and love.

Every Sabbath we drove 20 country miles to church. We studied our Sabbath school lessons

together, listened to women's trios sing "The Green Cathedral" and "I Walked Today Where Jesus Walked." I marveled at the farmer who sang the harmony part of "Ivory Palaces" in a duet with his wife. About half the time we had a preacher, though only once a month for the 11 o'clock hour. Somehow I didn't like those backwards Sabbaths when the church service came before Sabbath school.

Sabbath school itself was a highlight of the week. We had the best Sabbath school in the conference—a personal testimony of the conference Sabbath school secretary, and, since he was not running for office—as far as we knew—and since we didn't hear what he told the other churches, we believed him—besides, it confirmed our own opinion.

This memorable height of quality involved a tree cut from the creek by Uncle Andy. He mounted it in the center of the Sabbath school room where my Aunt Rosa, the kindergarten through primary leader, wrapped it and its branches in brown crepe paper. Paper birds flew on strings through paper leaves. On the brown-papered branches, cotton birds bedecked with scavenged feathers swelled their breasts.

Sabbath school felts had not yet been invented, so the Bible stories were told with paper cutouts placed in sandbox tables made by an uncle. Aunts taught the lesson. Cousins dug for penny offerings in pockets that contained a whole week's treasure—rusty nails, bits of string, an unusual stone, perhaps a shark-tooth fossil, an arrowhead, a rifle cartridge—anything worth a "show and tell" to interrupt the lesson.

Every Sabbath we recited our memory verse to the adults at the end of Sabbath school. They always smiled and chuckled because it was cute. On 13th Sabbath as a *tour de force*—actually at my mother's urging—I would do the family proud with 13 memory verses recited in order and with only occasional stammers.

On 13th Sabbath we brought to church the homemade banks that had collected 13 weeks of pennies for missions in Africa or the South Sea Islands. Once we had a giant church about two feet long and one foot high on which we pasted coins for 13 weeks until it was completely cov-

ered except for its dollar bill windows. The conference Sabbath school secretary took a picture when he saw it, and the photo was published in the union paper. We had arrived. We were the best. We set the standards.

Then a cloud passed over us when the nominating committee passed over Auntie Rosa. We weren't asked; we weren't told. But we noticed in silence. Not only was she not our leader, she didn't come to Sabbath school anymore—or church. Our teacher! Our leader! My auntie!

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Lost! I wondered if I'd ever see her in heaven.

What I loved, however, was not the services but the people who attended. Among the 60 regulars, the Seltmans dominated in numbers, followed by the Fricks and then a few other families without grandpas and supporting casts of uncles, aunts, and cousins, but with the credential of a good German name like Mohr or Reinhardt. These 60 people were the focus of my life. They created my identity. Their values—honesty, loyalty, and hard work—became mine. Deacon Dan told me almost every Sabbath that I should become a preacher. His counsel did not become "a call," but I did accept the less-demanding labels of leader, teacher, reader, and musician. The mothers, though they certainly didn't run the farms, did run the church. They asked the children to take part, and their praise of our childish efforts convinced us we were profound.

Since Grandma died, Grandpa Seltman had to do most of the grandparenting for 30 grandchildren. He knew our names, but not our birthdays. So he came prepared to church each Sabbath. If you had had a birthday during the week, you told Grandpa, and he pulled a 50-cent piece—a real half-dollar, not two quarters—from his pocket. If you didn't have a birthday you could "beg" for a white peppermint candy from his left suit-coat pocket or a pink wintergreen candy from the right. My tin bank bulges even today with years of hoarded, sentimental half-dollars. And I can still

taste the Sabbath wintergreen, my favorite. He taught me Hard Work—how to sharpen a plow, plant tomatoes, and lay a brick—but not about God. I can't remember a single story, not a single word my Grandpa spoke. He mumbled a quick German grace over family food.

At church were five sets of aunts and uncles whom I saw mainly on Sabbath. And I liked them all. I talked with them each week. My uncles teased me every Sabbath after church about my girlfriends until I finally had the courage to claim one. Aunts and uncles confined by Kansas win-

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ters to long evenings at home meant cousins and more cousins, who were usually born, my family noted, in September, October, or November—a little joke the aunts and uncles smiled at but I didn't comprehend.

Sabbath at its best began with lunch at Uncle Elverne and Aunt Mary's house. The peas and potatoes, the lettuce and tomatoes, and the lemonade and bread were tolerated in anticipation of Aunt Mary's sour-cream chocolate cake—a cake so moist and rich that it sometimes seemed best eaten with a spoon. After the last crumb of seconds, we were on our way—women and girls did the dishes. Cousins Bill, Lyle, Terry, Eddie, Larry and I were off to the barn—perhaps to practice gymnastics in the haymow or to build a hay bale cave. Sometimes we wondered together on Sabbath afternoon about the meaning of four-letter words and about how humans went about the breeding process we saw in the cattle almost every day. We would round up calves for a make-shift, one-event rodeo and ride bareback for a few glorious seconds before a descent into the manure of a well-used corral.

We felt secure in demonstrated but nonverbal family love. We sensed tentative financial secu-

rity as the just fruit of our Hard Work on the farm. We lived a romantic idyll of hard work, simple pleasure, and good food. But we never knew security in being saved.

Posted on the front wall of the church were The Ten Commandments in letters so large that all but the blind could read. They loomed over the heads of the children each Sabbath as they recited memory verses and sang new Sabbath songs. They stood at the preacher's right hand.

"For all have sinned and come short of the glory of God," we heard. "Only one in 20 Adventists are ready for the Second Coming," we were told. "Even the very elect will lead you astray," we were warned, and we wondered if that meant good Deacon Dan. We laughed politely among ourselves when our ebullient Pentecostal neighbors told us they were saved, for we knew better. We knew that we dared not sleep at night with unconfessed sins, so I held my eyes open trying to think of ones I might have forgotten.

The preachers preached the Second Coming in graphic and terrorizing detail. I understood that it would begin as a small black cloud the size of a man's hand and would grow in brilliance and glory until the whole heaven would shine with light that would bring begging sinners to their knees. But it would be too late.

One dark, cloudy day, shortly after hearing one of these prophetic sermons, I thought it was happening. At recess the dark clouds began to part. Brilliant outlines appeared at the thin edges of the breaking clouds. My heart raced. I wanted to be with my parents when it happened—I wasn't sure they were ready—I was certain I wasn't. Why anyone would pray for Christ's soon coming I could never understand. I waited for the sound of angel choirs and the sight of heavenly hosts. But when the clouds finally parted, I saw the sun not the Son. A close call. I sighed, relieved.

But the terror did not go away. Even the glorious sunsets playing with thunderheads over the prairie terrorized me for many years. I couldn't talk about the feeling, of course, so I sought comfort through more clever, subtle ways. When I was frightened that Christ was coming in

a sunset, I would seek out adults—usually Mother—on the pretext of showing them a natural wonder where I suspected the supernatural. I felt reprieved on every such occasion.

Why should I feel secure in Christ? Auntie Rosa, now living in bitter self-imposed exile, didn't feel secure. She even violated silence and told tales I did not want to hear. Two present deacons and a friend—whom she named—in their wasted youth were very close to the young Miller girl. "She got pregnant, and one of them did it," Aunt Rosa assured me, "and they probably don't know which one themselves. . . . And Charles, who piously takes up the offering, was found drunk, lying in a ditch with a naked woman outside a local barn dance." While I tried to resist believing her bitter recital, my life tasted worse ever after. There were cracks even in my idols—my aunt and the deacons—as there certainly were in me.

And our devoutly on-again, undevoutly off-again Sabbath school teacher was not much comfort either. We didn't talk about this soft-spoken farmer, but we often saw bruises on the body of his wife. Even to 12-year-olds it didn't make sense to accept his advice—I doubted even then the good effects of spanking a crying, newborn child on the first night home from the hospital. Perhaps, we thought we were good for the Sabbath school teacher instead of he for us. Maybe the class could convert the teacher.

The pastors weren't much comfort either. We sought their advice on Sabbathkeeping and diet but with negligible effect, except on church-potluck Sabbaths. They were too good. We couldn't get the victory over pepper or Pepsi.

Then there was the time that Pastor Jacobson talked to me while we washed dirty pots and pans at junior camp. He described in graphic detail a pastoral visit to an ailing young woman confined to bed. But before the visit was over, she threw back the covers in naked, seductive invitation. He told her calmly that he would visit her next week with his wife. Why he told me, I never knew—perhaps he wanted credit. Perhaps I rewarded him with my reactions. Perhaps he was instructing me in virtue. But with new, unused hormones running through my system, I was sure I would not

have measured up.

I heard "I am not worthy the least of His favor," but the rest of the song and message was foreign to my world. There was only a tentative security in a way of life exposed to crop-killing drought and hailstorms, livestock-killing lightening and blizzards, and tornados that changed farms to matchsticks in seconds. Any security we knew depended on our hard work. There was no rest in a farm life where there was always more work to be done. There was no completion—no perfection—for farmers.

Our religion, almost untouched by theology, came from the world we knew: hard work, fairness, and family. Our homesteading ancestors gave us farms on which we could earn a living, just as Christ's death on the cross gave us the opportunity to earn salvation. Neither crops nor salvation were sure. We never knew pure Grace.

We didn't talk religion much in Kansas. In Sabbath school classes we only asked questions from the quarterly. Answers came from Scripture read without comment. Dull, yes, but safe. Our religious life was private and personal. Church members didn't tell one another how to farm, how to raise their chil-

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dren, how to treat their wives, or how to believe. We were pragmatic. We expressed ourselves in action. At times of death we didn't talk sympathy; we plowed and harvested the widow's fields. Shortly after his conversion, Grandpa Seltman told the neighbors he didn't need to buy any insurance because God would protect him. Then lightening struck a stack of his wheat waiting to be threshed. We learned. We didn't announce God's providence in our life today, for fear that we might have to retract the testimony tomorrow.

Adventism was not an abstract intellectual exercise. It was real, tough-minded, chauvinistic,

and separated us from our neighbors. Sabbath observance meant no Friday-night football or basketball games—big social events in the local communities. Our scrupulous ban on dancing, movies, and alcohol denied us most other social opportunities. But, we didn't feel like martyrs. We were a remnant whose happiness did not depend on sinful pleasures.

We were a remnant in another sense as well—survivors of the Great Depression. Economic Darwinians, we believed we had survived

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because we were the fittest and now we deserved to enjoy the relative prosperity of the postwar world. Our two families—the Seltmans and the Fricks—had survived and farmed the land of tens of other families who had lost their farms and moved on.

We were established. Social lines were drawn. Religious lines were drawn in our community—unlike the time when Adventist evangelists had converted our recently arrived homesteading ancestors. Our evangelism became self-directed, especially toward the youth. We even became suspicious of newcomers. Good, hard-working, self-sufficient Christians sometimes worried that new converts might “confuse the church with the welfare department.”

We were a spiritually and economically blessed remnant. And we thought that those disappointed Millerites had been “just plain stupid”—“naive” not being in our vocabularies yet—for not having planted crops in 1844. We would have planted just to keep our bases covered in case he didn't come through. What we couldn't do for ourselves, we thought God might do for us.

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Our world was strewn with the debris of the Great Depression. Every mile or two on the way to church we saw dead farms—houses and barns no longer used, their shingles blown off, their windows broken and doors ajar, tin siding flapping in the wind. At other times only the windmill remained, or a few trees. Schools and churches died too—their clapboards grayed as white paint flaked off.

These skeletons told me of the shattered dreams of men and women, boys and girls who had left the land for Wichita, Chicago, Denver, and L.A. I watched a Lutheran church return to dust week after week as we drove by on Sabbath. The dignity and grandeur of sanctuary were gone long before a farmer cut a large door to transform it into a machine shed. A windstorm mercifully laid it down to rot soon thereafter.

I knew it couldn't happen to my church. We were committed. We would endure to the end. We were wrapped in the security of our land and our church. I wanted to believe that I could return again and again as long as I lived to see the stone house my grandpa built with his own hands, the barn I helped build, the steel corrals we created in our pastures, the creek where I fantasized adventures of Kit Carson, Buffalo Bill, and the Pawnee Indians, or my Sabbath home on the rocky hilltop.

The Seltman Fords still drive to church every Sabbath, but they don't stop at the top of the rocky hill. The trails of dust don't fade at the church anymore. However, after 80 harvests, my father still plows and sows. After 88 years, Grandpa's house still doesn't have a crack in its thick, stone walls. Aunts and uncles, cousins and their children still tend the wheat fields that have passed a century as Seltman farms.

The church still stands. And the grass still gets mowed; the roof repaired. The clapboards are still repainted. The antique chairs, stored in the empty bedroom of my brother's farm house down the road, are waiting the next special occasion—a family reunion, a wedding, or a funeral. The shrine lives. The silence is still a sanctuary.