

Windsor's Child

What God did in a small boy's life

*Honor your father and your mother, that your
days may be long in the land I will give you.*

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Prologue: The Standing Stone

Some of them are still standing today, several hundred years after they were placed in key locations where everyone could see them. That is what the ancients wanted. The stones were placed to be seen, so that passersby would ask, “What is the significance of this stone?” The one who erected the stone would say, “Well, let me tell you what God did for my family and me here.”

The Old Testament records this practice of erecting monuments to significant events in the lives of God’s people. The stones were huge; no one could miss them. Everyone knew the stones meant something significant had happened.

Although far smaller and less bulky, this treatise is my standing stone. It records what God did in my life. This stone is not intended to glorify me or the other people whose lives are revealed on these pages. We did nothing unusual or significant. It is what God has done that deserves to be recorded on monuments, whether they are stone or paper and ink.

This stone did not start out to be as big as it has become. Several years ago, while I was pastoring a small church in Illinois, I began to reminisce about my childhood in a small brick home more than 300 miles and forty years away from the house I then shared with my wife and daughters. I began to write down random memories. I wrote about a glimpse of something here, or a shadowy recollection there. There was no intention of making it to be anything more than a recording of memories for my own pleasure and for that of my family.

From that small collection of pebbles, the stone began to grow. My mother moved in 1995 from her home of more than forty years, to a new home she shared with my younger sister and her family. This brought about the discovery of boxes long hidden in the basement and attic of her home, boxes that contained the hard evidence of my shadowy memories. As I searched through letters, newspapers and photographs from that time so long ago, my random

reminiscences began to take on shape and form. They began to tell a story.

My mother herself provided much of the information I needed to tell the story. She often answered questions for me and volunteered information to me. She did not know what I was building. I had planned to give her a personal copy of the work once it was completed. She passed away in 1998, before I could complete the monument to what God did in her life and mine.

Since the humble beginnings of writings in Illinois, through our move to Columbus, Ohio in 1995, to Mom's death three years later, the pebbles began to take shape and form. And now they stand, glued together by the experiences of one little boy who grew up in Windsor, Ontario in the 1940's.

Someday I will join the members of my family whose earthly remains rest in a cemetery in Windsor. I will no longer be here on this earth. I will simply be remembered by my descendants as the funny-looking old man whose picture haunts the pages of family photo albums. That is okay with me. I honestly expect nothing more than that.

But I have erected this stone to glorify the God I have served for most of my life. He is a great God. He is worth knowing, trusting and believing. I leave this testimony behind, this standing stone of witness, so that future generations may know what God did for me. I won't be here to tell you about it then, except through the words recorded here. When you see this monument, I hope you will ask, "What does this mean?" If you read what I have written, you will know what it means. I will be saying to you from across the distances between us, "Let me tell you what God did for me here."

This is my standing stone.

1. *The Last Day*

The room was bright and noisy, not what you would expect for the event taking place in it. The brightness came from the warm September sun streaming through the window. The noise came from people busy about their work.

Some of the noise came from people who were not working. In fact, their normal routine had been interrupted by the event unfolding in the room. The noise they provided was from their conversations, low-voiced, occasionally punctuated by a quick laugh. Family conversations.

The auburn hair had long ago faded into silver. The skin that once was smooth and supple now was wrinkled and gnarly. The blue eyes that once sparkled at the voice of a certain young man now stared wide and vacant.

“They say it won’t be long now,” said my nephew Mike, who had met my daughters and me in the parking lot of Wyandotte General Hospital. We had driven four hours in our little red Neon from Columbus, Ohio, to Wyandotte, Michigan. It was Sunday, September 13, 1998.

Most of the people in the room had not been born when I was a little boy in Windsor. A few had. My older sister Diane. Another older sister Pat. My younger sister Lynne. An assortment of their sons, daughters, spouses and grandchildren filled the tiny room.

I stepped up beside the lady who lay wide-eyed but silent in the bed. A clear plastic tube brought oxygen to her, but her breathing was shallow and infrequent. It was hard to believe this delicate, frail body had endured so much, survived so much, accomplished so much.

“She was asking for you the other day,” said my niece, Pat’s daughter. “She kept asking, ‘Where’s my son?’”

“Hi, Mom,” I said. “It’s Tom. I’m here.”

Did the eyes flicker just a little in the brightness of the room? Did the mouth try to form the name it had formed thousands of times

before? Or was the expression vacant, empty of all recognition?

Was her mind still active? If so, what thoughts flitted about inside, flashing briefly center stage only to be pushed aside by another fleeting memory? Was there perhaps an ephemeral picture of a small brick house on a quiet street where six children played and grew? Or perhaps a transient view of another house where eight young people danced to the music of the day, their feet tapping on the green carpet? Or perhaps a quick look at a young lady wearing a pink dress on an April afternoon standing next to a handsome young man smartly dressed in white shirt, dark suit and tie?

Or were the memories darker ones? A cold March Friday where the wind blew around the stately trees that had not yet begun their spring rebirth – was that memory behind the vacant stare? Or were her reflections of another spring day where the warm sun shone brightly on those same trees, and family members gathered just a few yards away from the place visited on that March day many years earlier?

There was so much to remember. Ninety-six years of memories. Two countries. Seven homes. Hundreds of people she loved and who loved her. Joys and sorrows. For better, for worse. Sickness, health. What memories were behind the cold, blank stare?

“I stayed with her last night,” another nephew said. “She slept well, better than any night this week.”

“Just two weeks ago today, she felt pretty good.” My sister Lynne spoke. “We watched a movie on TV, and she ate good, and she said that she thought she was getting her appetite back.”

But there would be no more appetite. There would be no more food. No more tea to drink. No more canned foods like those often served in the home of her childhood. No more meat and potato dinners. No more snacks in front of the television.

“We need to turn her over,” a nurse said. “Could you all step outside for a minute?”

We did. All ten or twelve of us. In the hallway, the conversations continued, low-voiced, but with punctuations of nervous laughter.

It took several minutes for the nurses to complete their routine

behind the filmy white curtain they had drawn across our view. Occasionally a nurse would appear from behind the curtain with some mysterious piece of medical equipment, only to disappear again behind the veil.

“They said it would surely be today,” one of my niece’s said. “They said it couldn’t be much longer.”

After what seemed like a longer time than it was, the nurses said we could go back inside. We filed back in, all of us forming a semicircle around the bed. She was facing the window now, with her back to me. Did she see the bright sunlight streaming in as it must have in the *parlour* of so long ago? Did she notice the rays of cheering luminescence that once had danced and played on the glass shelves that hung in the window of the little brick house?

Her breathing remained shallow, sporadic. Conversations continued, taking their cue from her breathing. Words were superficial, scattered, punctuated by eternal silences.

Then, one long gasp of air. Her eyes shut tightly, as if blocking out some blinding light, a light brighter than the sunlight streaming through the window. Her face relaxed. She was gone.

Three days later we gathered again at the funeral home. I read a tribute to her that I had written about a week before her death. Pat’s pastor said a few words and we filed out to our cars to form the procession that would take her back to the place that, as far as I know, she had visited only twice. Once on that warm April day in 1978. And once on that cold March day in 1947.

Fort Street from Lincoln Park to Detroit was once a street of business and prosperity. Factories, stores and pleasant homes lined its pavement. But no more. Crumbling, abandoned buildings, old and tired, and pavement marred and cracked with the onslaughts of time met our procession as we took the journey to the bridge, the same bridge she and her young husband had watched from their apartment as it was built.

On the other side of that bridge was the spot she and her husband had purchased many years before. He was already there. Today she would join him. And just a few yards away was the other

spot. The white slab stood in sharp contrast to the dark green of the surrounding grass. Fifty-one years had passed since the dead, white stone was placed among the living blades of grass.

And there we left her resting among the dead, next to her husband, my father. And there she would lie still and cold until the promised day. And there she rests even now. At least that part of her that was of the earth.

Goodbye, Mom. Thank you for giving me life. Thank you for pointing me in the right direction. Thank you for being my Mom. Thank you for giving birth to *Windsor's Child*.

2. *Thank God for Fridays*

So many things happened on Friday. This story begins on a Friday, a Friday many decades ago. In the town of Ingersoll, Ontario, a little girl with auburn hair was born. It was June 6, and the year was 1902.

The little girl's father was George Albert Schott. He was a plant manager for Dominion Cannery, a leading Canadian canning company. George and his wife named their little girl Edna Marie. Soon his job caused the family to move from Ingersoll to St. Thomas and finally to Ridgeway, Ontario.

Almost two years later, on another Friday, and in another country, another baby was born, a boy. His parents lived in Detroit, Michigan. William and Annie Parsons named their little boy Whelan LaVerne, reflecting Annie's Scottish ancestors, the McGregors. There were four children in the family, two boys and two girls. The other boy, Everett, suffered from muscular dystrophy most of his life. One of the girls, Grace, grew up and married a farmer and died in a tractor accident on the farm she and her husband worked. The other girl, Helen, grew up to become an important part of this story.

The circus came to town on a Friday. The parade snaked its way down Jefferson Avenue on Detroit's near northeast side on that second day of June in 1911. Whelan, Grace and Everett wanted to see the parade; after all, their house at 293 Beaufait Avenue was less than a block away from Jefferson where the parade would pass. But William had been sick since the previous Sunday with stomach trouble and even thought he was at the point of death from the illness for a day or so. But Tuesday he started to feel better, and by Friday, though still weak, he felt he could accompany his children to the corner to watch the parade. Annie stayed home with the baby, 18-month-old Helen.

The many horse-drawn and motor-driven vehicles made their way past the intersection where William stood with three of his four

children. Nearly a hundred people, many of them children, shared the experience with William and his family.

Nearby, on the northeast corner of the intersection, a team of horses stood attached to a wagon carrying a boat launch which was being hauled to the freight house of the Michigan Central railroad which stood on that corner. The driver, Elza Ireland, stood inside the freight house.

The parade came to an end, and William, somewhat weakened by the excursion to the corner, rounded up the three children and headed for home about a half block west on Beaufait. Whelan and Grace ran ahead. There was a loud blast from the circus' steam-driven calliope which had just passed the intersection. The noise startled the horses, which began running west on Beaufait. Ireland ran from the freight house, but was too late to catch the reins to stop the horses.

William was near his home when he heard the clopping of the horses' hooves and the rumble of the wagon on the street. Turning around he saw the team and its heavy wagon heading straight for his children and a crowd of parents and children making their way home on the busy street. Without hesitation, William ran into the street and as he grabbed for the reins, one of the horses knocked him down to the pavement. The front wheel of the heavily-loaded wagon ran over William's legs. The back wheel ran over his chest. A few seconds later, Ireland was able to catch up to the team and stop it.

Unconscious, William was taken by police to St. Mary's Hospital. Physicians who examined him discovered he had sustained a broken ankle, and extensive injuries to his back and internal organs. There was little they could do. He died at about 5:00 in the afternoon of the same day. He was thirty-nine years old.

Shortly after this tragedy Annie Parsons moved her family to Mull, Ontario, less than thirty miles from Ridgetown where Edna Schott was growing up.

But those two Fridays in 1902 and 1904 are not the real beginning of this story. It really begins long, long, before that. And

the story does not begin in Canada, or in the United States. It begins in the heart of God.

God has always been at work. Always. There was never a time He did not know me, or know what He would do with me. The events of my life are events God either allowed or directed to happen according to the plan He had for me from before the foundations of the earth. God knew all about the things I will describe here even before He created the heavens and the earth. Imagine that. Before He said, "Let there be light," He saw the births of a little girl and a little boy who would grow up within thirty miles of each other. Before He said of His creation, "It is good," He knew about another little boy who would be born, and of the one brother and four sisters that little boy would have. Long before He said, "Where are you, Adam?" when seeking for His wayward child, He knew about another of his children who would hide in a basement while a storm would nearly destroy the little boy's house and future.

Long, long before the Apostle Paul wrote his New Testament letters, long before Jesus died outside the walls of Jerusalem, long before Daniel survived a lion's den and his friends survived a fiery furnace, long before King David looked from his rooftop and watched another man's wife bathing, long before Moses resisted God's call in his life, before Abram left Ur of the Chaldees, before Satan came before God to seek permission to try to destroy the life of God's servant, Job – long before any of these things happened, God knew about a fever, a Plymouth Sedan, a tornado, and a Bible verse on a cardboard poster. All the triumphs and failures, all the good times and the bad times were known by Him before they happened. Long before I was Windsor's child, I was God's child.

This is amazing to me. This is wonderful to me. How comforting to know that whatever happens in my life, God knew all about it all along and either allowed it, or directed it to come into my life. And He made those decisions before He created the earth on which those events would eventually take place.

The little boy born in Detroit, and the little girl born in Ingersoll met when they were still teenagers. The young man, Whelan, was

not the young man Mr. and Mrs. Schott wanted their daughter, Edna, to be with. Though not rich, the Schotts were comfortable. The canning industry provided a healthy and steady income for the family. Edna was used to some of the finer material benefits of that income and family stability.

Whelan, on the other hand, was the son of a widow. He was only seven when his father was fatally injured before his eyes. His mother's resources were limited, to say the least. He had dropped out of school at the age of 11 to go to work to help support his mother, two sisters, and invalid brother. He smoked, too. Not that that was frowned on as such. George Albert Schott was known to take his daughters to places like Hamilton, or Niagara Falls, and leave them on the sidewalk out in front while he went into a tobacco store to purchase fresh fodder for his ever-present pipe. But that was different. Whelan LaVerne Parsons was just not the man the Schotts wanted their daughter to be seeing.

But the Schotts wanted to provide a safe atmosphere in which their daughters could have their young men come courting. They did not refuse to allow Edna to see Whelan. In fact, he was often a guest in their home in Ridgetown. The green carpet of their *parlour* would provide a safe place for the young couple, along with Edna's sisters and their beaux, to meet and dance together to the music of the day. The day was the early 1920's. The music was as rowdy as the day. It was, after all, the Roaring Twenties.

On a spring day, April 25, 1925, Whelan LaVerne Parsons and Edna Marie Schott were married. She was 23, he was 21. She wore a pink dress, he a dark suit. They were married in the parsonage of a Presbyterian church in Windsor.

After their marriage, he wanted to live in Detroit; she in Canada. They compromised. They moved to Windsor.

Windsor, of course, is a Canadian city. In fact, it is the southernmost large Canadian city. It occupies an important site on the Great Lakes and the St. Lawrence Seaway. It produces a significant amount of the goods that make up the Canadian gross national product. Its citizens pay taxes to the Canadian