

The Adventure

Land of the Free

THE ADVENTURE



4. Land of the Free

by Frank Gray

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Following our unplanned exit from Laos Hennie and I needed to find space to sort ourselves out and prepare for whatever might lie ahead. A neutral academic environment might be just what we needed, and it seemed as though God had been arranging this for us.

Making it financially possible was one big factor. While I was in Laos, before Hennie arrived, my maternal grandmother had died, and unknown to me had left money in her will 'so that Frank would be provided for if he ever needed to go to Bible School.' Now that amount of money in my savings account was ready to become available. Hennie would be provided for through her sending mission in Netherlands – Parousia, the Dutch arm of the C&MA. They would also support half of Malcolm. The rest was up to me.

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Arriving in a new country we were most grateful that we had friends to help us get settled. We also had mission connections through the churches of the C&MA. To all intents and purposes we were 'refugees.' We owned very little and

were grateful to receive through their women's groups some of the basics of living – plates, dishes, cutlery, bedding and clothing. Wheaton College had a basement with racks of clothing for helping students in need, and Hennie was grateful for the opportunity for picking up winter clothes in particular.

Helen, whom we knew in Laos – the one who cooked for me in my single days – was in Wheaton, too, with her family, and lived just around the corner. She had

arranged for us to be met at the airport, and also helped us get acquainted with the local stores and restaurants, and the local Alliance church. We had quite a cultural adjustment to make on many fronts. Sunday lunch at the Ponderosa Steak House was one memorable example as we placed our orders. It was the many questions that were thrown at us: 'What dressing do you want?' 'Er, what dressing do you have?' (dumb question



Hennie out for walk with Malcolm

#1). 'Sour cream or chives?' 'Pardon, could you say that again...?' (#2)

Another area was the academic. I needed to be able to matriculate – to reconcile my own educational qualifications from the UK with those of the U.S. educational system in terms of humanities and social sciences. Happily the registrar was very helpful, but I felt slightly miffed that my 5 years of French, 4 years of Latin and 2 years of German at

school did not count for very much. My only 'deficiencies' could be satisfied by taking a smattering of undergraduate classes.

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My core courses in the Communications program were already pre-determined, but choosing my electives encouraged me to be selective. On offer were a wide range of interesting courses that took my attention.

One was Marxist-Leninist philosophy taught by a top scholar Dr Stephen Evans – as I had an inkling my future might be connected with broadcasting to people in communist countries. Another was the Gospel of Luke as taught by evangelical scholar of repute Dr Merrill Tenney. I also

signed up for Church Growth with Peter Wagner for summer school. The number of opportunities was amazing!

One of my first tasks was to decide how many courses to take in that first quarter... Hennie and I decided I should go for broke and take full load – four courses. By this means I would reduce the time we would need to be there – and we didn't yet know how far our funds would stretch. It seemed counter-productive to get a job on campus at minimum wage level while reducing my study load in order to do so.

One of the required undergraduate courses was particularly demanding – it was Old Testament Survey by Dr Schultz. It meant reading the entire Old Testament in ten short weeks and being sufficiently prepared to answer the many quizzes – something I hated intensely.

Our accommodation was student quarters on College Avenue - a short walk from the college. It was very



College Avenue apartment in winter

basic with our front room door opening straight to the outdoors. This was especially difficult when winter came and I would be stuck at the door trying to figure out what some over-excited student selling newspapers was trying to sign me up for! It was also noisy when trying to get Malcolm asleep at night. I still remember walking back and forth, back and forth singing 'Swing Low Sweet Chari-o-ot....' to get Malcolm to sleep. Then just as I was laying him in his cot a noise from upstairs and he would be wide awake again... I also knew I had a 9 o'clock lecture... Ouch!

Coming from Laos neither Hennie nor I had appreciated how much the war and the uncertainty there had impacted our outlook on life. After about three months we both came to realise that we still felt insecure, not wanting to buy much 'because we might have to leave next week.' We had existed largely on charity, for which we were grateful, but recognised that we could now buy things for our home and things that we needed. It was okay, no one was going to throw us out at short notice. We could feel secure in the USA.

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Most of our Grad School classes were in Buswell Hall – often described as ‘the threshold to the boiler house’. These were the pioneering days of the Communications Department, later to get the newly-built Billy Graham Center (named after its most famous alumnus) as its own. The students were an interesting bunch, mostly with rich, in-the-field experiences they brought with them. Some of them had been in Africa and Latin America and there was a smattering of overseas students thrown in. Some of my fellow students I would encounter later in life, many holding key positions.

One of our instructors was Myrna Grant, later to receive her PhD, who was responsible for the softer, more creative side of communication, in contrast to the marketing background of Dr Engel who directed the Communications program. One of the courses she taught was writing drama scripts for radio. One day she invited our class round to her house and we listened together to the infamous War of the Worlds 1938 broadcast by Orson Welles based on the original story by H.G. Wells. I remember having to write a drama based on the life of an English pastor and hymn-writer from the 18th century, Philip Doddridge. It was hard work but I finally submitted my

15-minute drama script. But she marked me down because it contained 'too many British-isms.' I felt indignant. How was I to know what Brits said that American people didn't?

Myrna had some good contacts in the UK, people who worked in mainline broadcasting and through them she had arranged a two-week summer program in London in the summer of 1976 with the help of BBC producer, Michael Shoesmith. I signed up for that program which was held at Regents College in London, in what proved to be a very warm, dry summer. In fact I was quite embarrassed by the lack of water fountains and iced drinks fellow American students craved.



Myrna Grant in BBC Pebble Mill studios where 'The Archers' produced

During those two weeks we were exposed to a number of broadcasters. Most memorable of these were Peter Brooks, whose textbook *Person to Person*, I had devoured with great interest, and Angela Tilby who can still be heard on BBC's Thought for the Day on Radio 4. Phil

Booth, the director of WEC's Radio Worldwide, also came to share his views of Missionary Radio. We also enjoyed a day trip to BBC's Pebble Mill production unit in Birmingham and the studio where the famous Archers soap opera was recorded. The experience stood out for me as a cultural shift away from market-driven broadcasting to offer an alternative model that encouraged programs that touched the lives of individuals and demonstrated great sensitivity. In my write-up at the end of the course I started my summary as follows: *'The two weeks of exposure to British religious broadcasting has been an 'experience' rather than a series of lectures There are perhaps two words which have impressed themselves upon me – "honesty" and "sensitivity" and they have already been elaborated upon to a large extent... best epitomised in Jesus and His life and example. But perhaps of greater import has been a vision of the enormity of the task we face as communicators...'*

Being in England also gave me a useful opportunity to catch up briefly



Meeting former boss at LNR, Brian Denney at BBC.

with family and friends – and for them to see how much I was becoming ‘Americanized.’ It was also a time for me to make some comparisons. I remember one weekend going to visit a Christian friend from Exeter U. who had recently lost her husband to leukemia. On my way to her home in one of the London suburbs I was feeling a bit depressed about the ageing,

...after my visit I went down the street in a much lighter mood. I saw how these aged streets had character!

red brick houses that lined the streets – and the general feeling of being closed-in after getting used to the wide pristine streets of Wheaton, Illinois with their white, boarded houses. However, after my visit I went down the street in a much lighter mood. I saw how these aged streets had character! They had a story to tell.

They were not nicely sanitised but expressed a real world, and history, of which I could be proud.

Our first Christmas in the States, and Malcolm's very first Christmas, was memorable. Our missionary friends from Laos, Ollie and Winnie Kaetzel, lived in Iowa, the next state to Michigan. They had invited us to join them and their family for Christmas. We agreed that if we flew there they would bring us back to Wheaton in the New Year. Everything was going well,

Malcolm travelled well and we had a lovely relaxed time. Then as New Year's Day 1976 approached we were stunned by a severe weather warning. A winter storm was heading our way. And to add to the mix we learned that Ollie, who pastored a church, would be unable to take us home as he had a funeral to conduct. Winnie and her daughter Sharon would need to take us instead – and we would need to leave in good time on New Year's Day. So after an early lunch we left heading east. All went well for the first hour or two – but then the weather turned...

Hennie and I had never encountered a 'winter storm' before but we soon found out. Traffic was very light – fortunately – but the handling of the station wagon became increasingly difficult as we went along. First Winnie drove, then Sharon – and finally I came to realise that I should step up to the plate and offer to drive. To this point I had never driven in the USA, nor had I any experience of an automatic drive. I was soon to learn!

When we got to Rockford, just inside Illinois, the car was plated in ice – the radiator grille, the radio antenna. Freezing rain had coated everything with an inch-thick layer of ice!

Black ice on the road meant that we slid to a halt at traffic lights. Thankfully there weren't many. Finally, around midnight, we were nearly home when my concentration lapsed and I went to change gear (!) as we approached traffic lights. But the pedal was the brake pedal! The sudden jolt woke everyone up – but we laughed it off. I think that was my only gaff in what had proved to be a challenging journey.

The next day we moved from College Avenue to President Street apartments for married students with families. It was God's provision – and proved to be a lot quieter than the previous one. Winnie and Sharon stayed to help before returning home – in fairer weather than when we came!

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It was in our new apartment block that we began to make new friends. Next door to us were Will and Madeleine Walker both from South Africa but now living in Canada. Along the corridor were Derek and Judy Chignell. Derek was from UK and taught Chemistry at Wheaton while studying Communications.

Downstairs were the Battys – Dave and Patty – who worked with youth ministry Team Challenge. Their small boy, Tim, was



Malcolm turned blue on his toboggan!

Malcolm's age – and we had a joint first birthday party in the park for them both. It was freezing!

Another good friend who deserves mention is Eileen Kuhn, a mature student and former OMF missionary who also had connections with Laos in her past. Most memorable was the evening that she invited us over for dinner at her house nearby. Hennie and I walked there, pushing Malcolm

in his pram.

As we were eating dinner I suddenly noticed that in Hennie's engagement ring there was a gaping hole. The diamond was missing! Horrors! Eileen immediately stopped to pray that we might find it. As soon as dinner was over we went out into the dark night and starting our search on the driveway – the most probable place. Perhaps it got knocked out while getting Malcolm out of the pram. I reasoned that as a diamond it

would reflect light so started inspecting any glimmer of light on the ground that stood between me and the house.

Amazingly there it was! I stooped and picked it up with great excitement. Eileen's prayer had been answered. We later took it to a jeweller to have the diamond reset in platinum rather than the soft 18-carat gold as used in Laos where it had been made a few years earlier.

As married students we had the privilege of gardening on a small plot of land allocated by the college. The growing season there was quite short – but it was safe to plant



President St apartments: ours was top right

out in May. We had seedlings fibre pots in polythene milk cartons along our window sill – outside – then when it was warm enough I was able to plant them out in the rich, dark soil. It was the brocolli that we did best at. We referred to it as "trees" as the plants were prolific and taller than me!

Within a week or two of moving we received an urgent phone call from Hennie's sister, Tiny. Their mother, Wubbegiena, was in hospital again, and this time her cancer seemed to be terminal. Hennie knew that she needed to return to Holland and would need to take Malcolm with her. Those were the days of 45-day Apex fares and we got her another Icelandic Airways flight to Luxembourg.

It was hard saying goodbyes again. Going on trips was going to become a feature of our family life but we did not yet know that. Just a few months previous I had to wave goodbye to them at Bangkok International – but now it was from Chicago's O'Hare.

It was also freezing cold in January. So there she was - around midnight - with little cash, baby Malcolm and nowhere to go...

What we had not anticipated was that Hennie was going to face problems getting from Luxemburg back to Eindhoven. The flight arrived late in the evening and she took a train – but it only went as far as Maastricht! It was also freezing cold in January. So there she was – around midnight – with little cash, baby Malcolm and nowhere to go... Thankfully she had her address book and

found that one of her former college friends from the European Bible Institute (EBI) in Lamorlaye lived in town. She phoned to get help from them. They graciously picked her up at the station, put her up for the night and then Hennie's brother-in-law, Jan, came the following day and drove them back to Eindhoven.

It was a very special time that Hennie had with her mother who also enjoyed seeing Malcolm who was already growing out of the baby stage as he approached his first birthday. Farewells were not easy but those six weeks had been well spent. It was now time for the trip back to Chicago. Unfortunately all was not well in Iceland as a general strike was declared which also affected the nation's airline. Just as it appeared that Hennie and Malcolm would be stuck in Luxemburg the strike was declared over and flights would be resumed. The only hitch was that instead of flying into Chicago they would be landing in New York. I then had to work hard to determine which flight they would be on to Chicago, so with some friends we went out to meet them.

It was such a relief and joy to see them both again - except that after 6 weeks away Malcolm did not recognise me! A few

weeks later Hennie's mother passed away, a very dear Christian lady who had largely spent her life quietly serving others.

It was good to be in college again. The courses were stimulating, though very much inclined toward the US environment. Taking a full load as a married student meant a



Enjoying the Autumn leaves

lot of hard work but the subjects got me thinking and studying with Dr Jim Engel was a privilege. There were also a few other eminent professors on staff such

as author Jim Johnson. The Grad School's Distinguished

Lectureship series also gave exposure to, among others, Dr Lloyd Ogilvy, Brother Andrew, and Jim Bowman from FEBC in California.

Wheaton provided the space we both needed to evaluate our experiences in Laos. For my part I was most interested in examining the religious beliefs of the Buddhist people of Laos.

So many of the practices and lifestyle did not seem to have their basis in Buddhism at all. I found that to understand these one needs to go back into the history of the Lao people to identify the various religious influences they had been exposed to, back to the Khmer kingdom of the 13th century, with its Hindu and Brahmin cultures. And before these there were their traditional animistic beliefs. So what we had witnessed was a culture and belief system comprised of many layers, superimposed and fused together.

Earlier we had received a visit from Dr L.L. King, the head of the C&MA whom we had met previously when he visited Laos. He came to invite me to join C&MA on a permanent basis and talked of radio openings in India that were linked with TWR. I declined but agreed instead to help C&MA with resettling the many refugees from Laos that were now arriving in North America. Concerned by their struggles to adapt in this new country, and dismayed by the fact that other missionaries to Laos had been re-deployed to other fields, I had written a paper on what might be done to assist the many Christian refugees. Now they were asking me to do it. My only condition was that I could do that in tandem with FEBC's need to get radio program production started for the shortwave services

into Laos from Manila, Philippines. That was also in C&MA's interests.

So, in December 1976, I made an exploratory trip to Whittier, California, to check out that possibility and how it might work in practice. By that time Keodouangsy, my Big Sister from Laos, had arrived there and was beginning to get involved with FEBC in preparing Lao radio programs. It all seemed to be



With Big Sister outside FEBC
in Whittier

coming together. Little did I know that very soon after my visit she was to be swept off her feet by a Cambodian suitor, Joe Kong, who had come down from Oregon to meet her. He was a new believer but a friend of Lim Chheong, FEBC's Cambodian broadcaster. Outside of Cambodia for agricultural studies, God had spared him from the Pol Pot genocide. But his wife had been taken ill and died leaving him as a widower with five

children. Keodouangsy was just the lovely Christian girl he was looking for!

Toward the end of our time in Wheaton we had opportunity to



Nyaj arrives in Chicago with family

re-connect with a few Lao and Hmong refugees whom we had known in Laos, including some former colleagues. Yang Nyaj arrived with his

wife and baby daughter, bound for Dixon Illinois.

Chanthalom who had worked on health programs in our Vientiane studio arrived with her baby daughter and policeman husband, Phoxay. I still remember the fear I saw in his eyes following their harrowing time in Laos after we had left. It was fun to have them join us for our second Christmas. Wayne Persons and I went to visit some Hmong refugees newly arrived in Chicago. They wanted to burn their demon things and become Christians. Their little daughter in a flimsy cotton dress was running around in sub-zero temperatures, quite oblivious to the cruel cold which they had never known

before. On one occasion I went to visit a school in nearby Lombard. The teacher was having a problem with a small Lao girl who would take food, and then run away to hide it somewhere. It

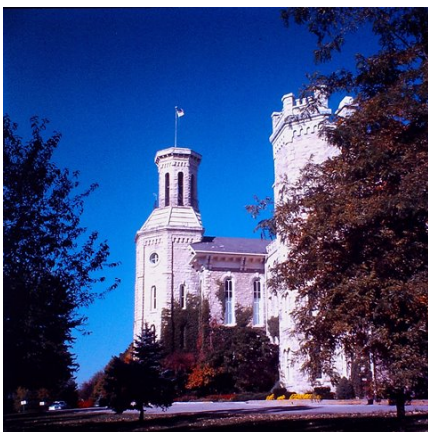


Christmas with Phoxay and Chanthalom and family

was no doubt a habit developed in the refugee camp. All these were insights into the huge cultural changes so many families were embarking on.

I cannot finish this chapter without giving some impressions of our seventeen months in Wheaton in particular. Putting it another way 'did we get what we expected?'

First we need to put Wheaton, Illinois, in perspective. During the 1970s it was the 'Mecca' of the evangelical Christian world – or many spoke of it in those terms. This was largely due to the influence of Wheaton College which had a history going back to the 19th century having been founded by Jonathan Blanchard.



Blanchard Hall, Wheaton College in autumn

As such it was the home for many Christian organisations – often with significant connections to the college. Former students often went on to found new agencies so many came to be established in Wheaton or neighbouring suburbs of Chicago. An example of

this was The Living Bible (1971) and Tyndale House publishers, founded by Dr Kenneth Taylor.

Wheaton College was also a centre for much evangelical scholarship. It attracted a number of key academics and Bible scholars such as Dr Merrill Tenney. I counted it a great privilege to study there. It felt like the centre of the Christian world in many respects – although later, in California, I was also to feel much the same about Christian academic centres there – such as Fuller Seminary and the US Centre for World Mission in Pasadena.

The Communications Department in the Graduate School, tended to be a bit *avant garde*. This was largely due to the impact of Dr Jim Engel and his background in marketing and research. He was the author of a number of key textbooks – such as "Consumer Behavior" and "Promotional Strategy" - and it was his attempts to bring some of these principles into church and mission that used to cause some friction with more conservative elements. In writing his first Christian book he teamed up with Dr Will Norton, a former missionary and missiologist, and Dean of the Grad School, to write "What's Gone Wrong with the Harvest?" (1975). The First Church of Rollingwood was the fictitious name he gave to a church and its ministry to which he was applying his critiques. It was based on a popular church in Wheaton, but raised some very crucial questions for those of us interested in communications and its effectiveness.

Author of "The Gospel Blimp" Joe Bayly also visited the college, while Jim Johnson taught a very helpful course on Writing for Magazines, which I attended. Both of them were reactionaries to the traditional, cosy, evangelical circles of that time and

helped stir up the Christian community to think Biblically and critically about its mission in the contemporary world.

Jim Johnson used to tell about a valuable lesson he learned in his youth: never be afraid to put your name to something you have written. That was impressed upon him by his father who was a farmer just outside of Chicago. In one of Jim's rebellious, angry moments he climbed on the roof of one of their barns and painted an obscenity in large letters. At evening drive time, commuters all saw the bold words on the barn roof as they drove home. His father was upset – but also very wise. Instead of getting Jim to erase what he had written, he got him to climb up on the roof again – and sign his name to it!

In church and missions circles today Jim Engel is best known for his Spiritual Decision Process chart – better known as "The Engel Scale". As mentioned earlier this had let in a lot of light for me during my mission days in Laos. It had been just what I needed. But I also had enough experience behind me by now to want to make some modifications – by adding a second dimension connected with attitude and

I presented a 2-dimensional version of the Scale to Dr Engel before finishing at the Grad School.

openness to the Gospel. This worked quite independently of knowledge – and changing attitudes to produce openness was surely a worthy goal in its own right. I presented a 2-dimensional version of the Scale to Dr Engel before finishing at the Grad School. This has later become known as The Gray Matrix and in some circles, both in media and elsewhere, it has gained a lot of currency. I have written about this in greater depth in a later chapter.

Outside of the immediate college environment there were a number of Christian organisations encamped that thrived on their proximity to the college. It was my first exposure to American Christian agencies. I was impressed by their entrepreneurial spirit and innovation in creating niche markets, but also found myself shocked by some of their ethos – especially those that were 'for profit.' To my way of thinking it seemed unthinkable that Christian agencies should do ministry to make a profit. One was particularly aggressive in its phone-marketing exploits which made me feel particularly uncomfortable. Having just come from Southeast Asia and witnessed the poverty of believers

To my way of thinking it seemed unthinkable that Christian agencies should do ministry to make a profit.

there, this American model seemed quite unsavoury. How could Christians make themselves wealthy from doing the Lord's work?

The Communications Department was making preparations for their new building – the Billy Graham Center – which was in the planning stage and would become their new home. A small group of staff were asking some serious questions about the changes that might need to be made if they were to attract more students from other countries. So they called a small group of foreign students together. It was an interesting discussion.

African students in particular, but some Asians as well, were concerned about the extremely high expectations that were placed upon them when they returned home. Much money had been invested in sending them to USA on scholarships – but would they be able to deliver once they returned home? The pressures were enormous.

This raised the question about much of what they learned at Wheaton was relevant to their situation at home? This was a question also close to my own heart as very often throughout

my seventeen months I had been trying to sift through what we were learning to determine its relevance. Principles of communication were universals that could be applied anywhere (or could they?). Many aspects of communication such as found in traditional cultures were also very powerful at home – and should not be discarded in favour of a US model.

I was aware too that some elements were irrelevant to situations outside of north America – as in relation to dealing with commercial radio stations.



FEBC's former head office in Whittier, California

As mentioned earlier, I saw this return to college helped create a platform from which to build my future career in Christian media and radio in particular. It was something that fascinated me far more than the engineering aspects of communications which were part of my undergraduate work. Everything seemed to be pointing to a future with Far East Broadcasting Company (FEBC) headquartered in California – and that was where we would be heading. I felt that God had put together an incredible combination of education and experience for me that I could not have imagined. It was also affirming to have a strong sense of direction and the enthusiasm to go with it.

The 'can do' spirit that I encountered in the States was refreshing and something I really grew to appreciate – a marked contrast to the negative, critical spirit that grips much of the climate in UK culture. Being an ideas person it resonated well with my drive to innovate and find better ways of doing things. I thrived on it at a critical time in my life when the future still lay before us.

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Time in Wheaton was coming to an end and we were experiencing another very harsh winter with plenty of ice and snow and temperatures plummeting to around minus 25. Car engines had difficulty in starting because the engine oil was so thick. The pavements were hazardous, my moustache froze and eyelashes would get stuck together. We would also get huge electric shocks whenever we reached out to touch anything metal, like our front door handle. This was winter! By the time the temperature rose to 0 F (around -18 C) it was feeling quite warm already and freezing point felt hot!

Our family was also growing. When we heard that a second baby was due in early January I could already envisage what kind of weather that might be. It was just before midnight on January 9th that we set off for Delnor Nursing Home in St Charles, Illinois. Snow was already falling and the temperature as we passed the



Now we are four! Welcome, Eduard!

Glen Ellyn shopping mall showed just a few degrees Fahrenheit. It was cold! In fact quite the opposite from what we had experienced in Thailand when Malcolm was born. But this time I would be there...!

Except... I was there and I wasn't there. In the delivery room I stood behind Hennie and held her hand as time for the birth approached. All was going to plan except that there was a likely complication with the baby's pulse fluctuating between 3 and 300. He had the cord around his neck, but happily the staff were prepared for that and delivery went without further complication. It was a boy! The jubilant doctor then proceeded to hold up the placenta – and that was when I passed out. Hennie could feel my hands slipping – and then there was a thud and I was on the floor! When I came around I was duly chastised for not having warned them about my predisposition toward blood (this was the latest in the series, the first having been when dissecting a sheep's eye in a physics lesson at school!).

When we headed back home to Wheaton two days later with baby Eduard the temperature had dropped even further. Mother and baby were both doing fine and within a few short

weeks the four of us would be heading southwest to California.

By now we had an



Sam setting out to drive to California

old station wagon but there was no way I was going to drive the 2000-mile journey with our young family and through wild wintry weather. Happily one of our fellow students, Sam Reimer, was happy to take up the challenge. With a U-Haul trailer in tow he set off while we readied ourselves for going to the airport bound for Los Angeles.

That was Saturday morning. On arrival in Whittier we checked into the Blue Pacific Motel next door to FEBC's main office on Whittier Blvd. To our amazement Sam arrived Monday evening driving our 1963 Buick. He had got stuck in the snow in Illinois but once given a tow he had persevered without hardly stopping.

To our surprise we found they also had snow in California – and we had given away our toboggan in Wheaton without realising it... We had a lot to learn!

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Note:

This is a draft of the fourth chapter. You can read the other chapters and also view the extensive photo gallery if you visit the dedicated Adventure web site at <http://francisgray.com/adventure/>

Cover photo: The familiar tower of Blanchard Hall at Wheaton College