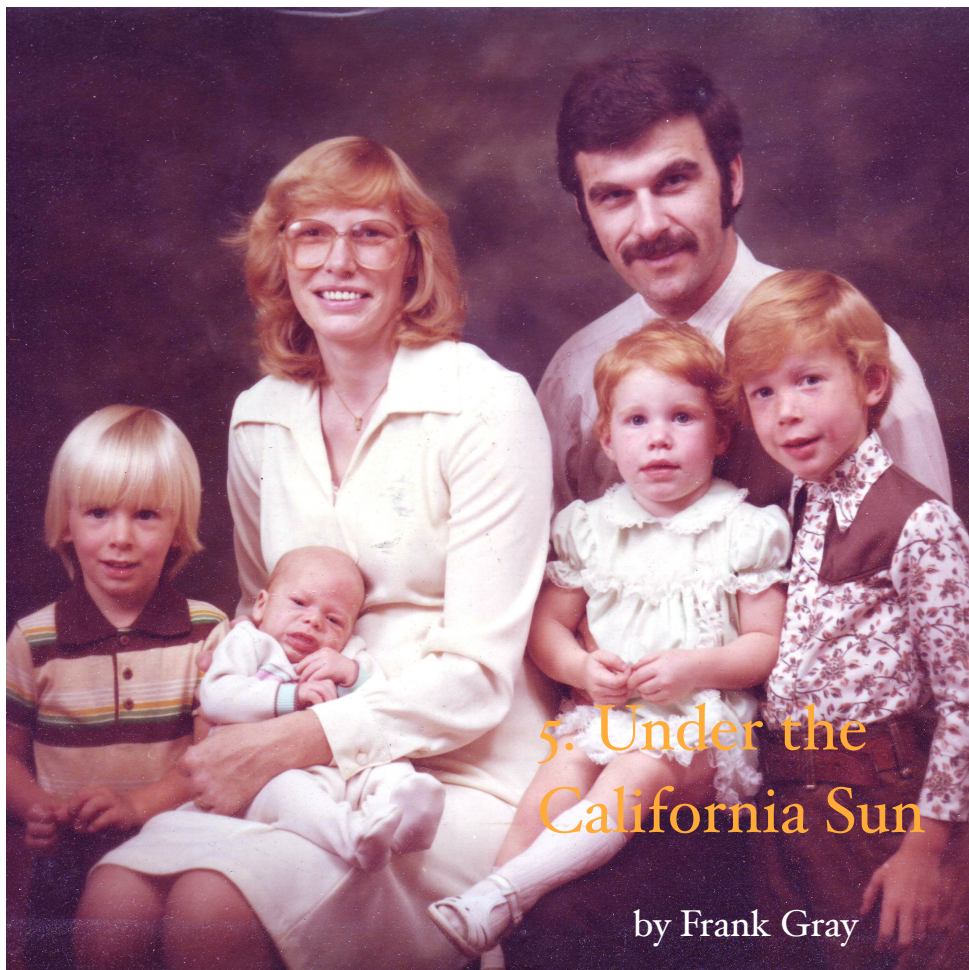


The Adventure

Under the California Sun

THE ADVENTURE



5. Under the
California Sun

by Frank Gray

It was hard to believe that we were really now living in California, exploring the expansive freeways, embracing the amazing backdrop of the San Gabriel mountains to the north and tempted by the call of the Pacific Ocean and popular beaches to the south.

The sheer geographical scale of the Los Angeles area needs to be experienced to be believed and the distances people travel for their daily commute defies belief. We were making new friends both through the church and among FEBC staff and our immediate priority was to find somewhere to live. After some searching we found a downstairs apartment in La Habra that was to serve us well, just a few miles from the FEBC offices.

Within a day or two of arriving Dr Bowman, co-founder and president of FEBC, took me with him to speak at an FEBC fund-raising banquet. He interviewed me about our experiences of getting out of Laos and what we used to do there. This was all quite new to me, but it was part of our introduction to California - and to FEBC. It soon became clear that with our stories and coupled with a British accent I had some novelty value!

We did not adopt a lavish lifestyle since we lived on a very modest income provided



Outside Burwood apartment

by the C&MA. Our first priority was to work with refugees from Laos who were arriving in California in considerable numbers.

We soon came to discover that apartment-living tended to be for divorcees, single mothers and people on low incomes. It was after we had lived in Burwood Street for a few months that Hennie got talking with the other ladies around our apartments who seemed to have quite a different lifestyle. They asked her how it was that we were 'different' – a happily married couple with two children who seemed to play well together. Hennie was able to tell them about our background, our love for Jesus, and what had brought us there. By contrast many of them were single mums with a Mormon background, who often entertained their boyfriends overnight.

It was after we had lived in Burwood Street for a few months that Hennie got talking with the other ladies around our apartments who seemed to have quite a different lifestyle.

Our appointment with C&MA was through their Specialized Ministries division with a mandate to establish contact with all the pastors and other Christians who were arriving as refugees from Laos. I was able to bring Chong Lee on board too, both to work on the Hmong broadcasts and with me in refugee ministry. It meant locating where pastors were living and maintaining contact with them by phone and by letter.

In the autumn of 1978 Chong Lee and I went on a whistle-stop tour around the western states. It was carefully planned so

that we had an itinerary which we had drawn up with various C&MA churches and pastors. We travelled up the west coast stopping in Turlock and Portland, passing Mt St Helens (which was to erupt in spectacular fashion some two years later) along the way.

In Seattle we stayed for a couple of nights meeting up with Sam Mattix (who had been captured with Lloyd Oppel in Laos)



Chong Lee with Hmong in Spokane

who was also involved in helping refugees, often as an interpreter. We then drove east to Spokane where the C&MA pastor worked with a large number of Hmong whom his church had sponsored.

From there to Missoula, Montana

where another C&MA church had taken to heart the needs of many Hmong. Norman and Sylvia Foss were our delightful hosts for a couple of days in Big Sky country before we turned south across the plains of Idaho to Utah. It was a big adventure for us both.

We stopped for lunch at an outpost in Hill, Idaho. The sign on the highway pointed to what was known as the Old School House – an interesting place decked out with memorabilia from a by-gone age – both inside and out. 'All Our Yesterdays' it read on the outside. It looked fun! When a lady came to take

our lunch order she was intrigued by our manner of speech. "Now tell me where you are from," she said. I told her we had come up from L.A. and were now headed back. She pushed further. "Now tell me where you are really from..."



Relaxing after lunch in Idaho

I told her I was from UK and Lee told how he had come from Laos. That got her interested. She looked up at the wall where a variety of firearms were hanging.

"See that one?" She said, pointing. "My son brought that one back from Laos but has never been able to figure out how to fire it." "No problem," said Lee with a broad smile. It was a Hmong musket, and he quickly showed her how to arm it - and fire. She was delighted. Her food was good too.

In Utah we met with groups of Christian Hmong in Provo and Salt Lake City. In Provo they were making a living by farming mushrooms. Several years later Chong Lee showed me a letter from one young fellow who had been in the Provo meeting. He had felt moved as Chong Lee spoke and committed his life to the Lord. He wrote to tell us how he had gone on to college and seminary and was now ordained.

Climbing out of Salt Lake City and on our way home we were stopped by the cops – allegedly for speeding (I had been

driving). When we told them we were missionaries they decided to take no further action. We assume they took us for Mormons...! In all, we covered around 3500 miles in just ten days.

In November 1978 at the Rolling J Ranch, just north of LA, all our work for the past two years came together. At the instigation of C&MA's division of Specialized Ministries we



Hmong pastors at Rolling J Ranch

convened a conference for the twenty-five pastors from Laos whom we had been in touch with. They came from as far away as Hawaii and New York. We also had Richard Colenso there as head of SM, Ernie Heimbach, a former OMF missionary to the Hmong, Don Durling whom we knew in Laos, and David Andrianoff whose parents had been

pioneers among the Hmong in the Xieng Khouang province of Laos.

It proved to be an ideal setting as there were lots of rural activities we could all participate in for leisure – horseback riding, archery, horseshoes. It was also a time of teaching and fellowship with Lee taking a lead role. It addressed governance issues and how a Hmong Alliance fellowship could be established across N. America.

*For Lee
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This proved to be a landmark event for within twenty years the number of members of the Hmong Alliance church had risen to around fifty thousand. Many of their leaders were well-qualified, with post-graduate degrees. General Vang Pao, the former CIA-backed military commander, by then living in the USA, had encouraged the Hmong to take full advantage of getting an education – and they had not hesitated.

Most of the Hmong moved on from their original areas and had congregated in parts of Minnesota, Georgia, and California especially. Many of the churches were heart-broken to say goodbye to these lovable people after they had invested so much in helping get them settled.

For Lee and me our job was now done – but what next? Lee had been offered a scholarship to study at the Cincinatti Bible Institute in Ohio. For me, I was not sure what lay ahead.

I had already been involved in the Asian Language Program Department of FEBC since moving to California in 1977. It had grown considerably in the late 70s as refugee programming staff arrived from Southeast Asia. Because of this there was no

longer enough room or facilities in the main office on Whittier Boulevard. They were all there to record radio programs so demand for studio time had risen dramatically. So FEBC rented new office space in a single-storey building on Greenleaf – just around the corner. The growing number of broadcasters included Vietnamese, Cambodians, Lao and Hmong – as well as one or two Chinese, a Burmese and a few Russians. And I had been asked to oversee them all and help



With the Lao Department outside studios on Greenleaf Blvd

coordinate their activities.

The CEO of FEBC, Dr Eugene Bertermann, knew me quite well and was aware of my uncertain future. One morning he called me to his office. He put his hand on my shoulder and told me that he wanted me in FEBC. I did not give him an immediate

answer but in many ways it seemed to be my destiny ever since I had been in Laos. I also knew that if I were to join FEBC I would want to see Lee make the same move too – except that he was planning on moving to Ohio....

On the family front we now had our first and only daughter, Anita. She was born in La Mirada Community Hospital the day after Hennie's birthday in August 1978. It was another classic example of Hennie's coolness. I had already driven to my office that morning and then around 9am Hennie phoned to say that the baby was coming – but not to hurry. In twenty minutes I was home and Hennie had Malcolm and Eduard ready to leave. We first had to stop by the drug store to pick up some disposable diapers then drop the boys off with our Vietnamese friends who had offered to baby-sit.



Malcolm and Eduard with new sister Anita

I was beginning to get anxious for fear that I might yet end up having to deliver the baby in our car, as happened to our

friends. Finally we got to the Community Hospital and Hennie

was wheeled away, But alas, I was not there in time for her birth as I was still completing insurance papers at the reception desk. Anita was born in a hurry, and sunny-side up. By the time I first set eyes on her she was filling the air with her healthy voice.

It was very soon after joining FEBC that my new boss Jim Bowman, son of FEBC co-founder Bob Bowman, asked me to take on the responsibility of becoming General Program Director. Since the previous GPD, Carl Lawrence, had moved over to Haven of Rest, Jim, as Director of Field Operations, had taken on that responsibility on a temporary basis but soon found it was too much to handle. He had recently moved down from San Francisco where he had been station manager of FEBC's very successful shortwave station KGEI in Redwood City. This station carried broadcasts in Spanish throughout the day, as well as a few hours of Portuguese for Brazil, and had an amazing ministry to virtually the entire continent of South America. The coverage it provided for the Caribbean in particular was exceptional, so much so that it was requisitioned by the US government during the Cuban missile crisis standoff in 1962 when the world tottered on the edge of nuclear



CEO Rip Carlson with President Bob Bowman at opening of La Mirada offices

war.

I learned a lot from Jim. He was philosophical and a thinker, and able to articulate clearly what FEBC's programming should be about. He also had an excellent grasp of the scriptures and knew how to reflect their teaching into daily life. He knew FEBC well having grown up with it, spending much of his childhood in Manila. We often had lunch together in the office while playing chess – and later Chinese chess.

New FEBC offices were built in La Mirada and dedicated in 1979. Now for the first time we could all work under one roof. My office was upstairs, the last one on the left on the south and sunny side of the building so I usually worked with the door open. One comic, Georgalyn, formerly directrix in FEBC Japan,



The sign - worthy of a photo!

had put up a sign below my name outside my door: 'Broken English Spoken Perfectly!'.

By May 1980 our family was complete. Whereas Anita had entered the world in a great hurry her younger brother, Paul, was to be just the opposite. Hennie was

admitted to Whittier Hospital on April 30th in the expectation of a soon arrival, but nothing happened and the doctors were beginning to get anxious, talking of having to induce labour. But that was not needed and by midday on May Day (also Labour Day in USA!), Paul finally arrived. Thankfully he was in good health and checked out well.

But with Malcolm's fifth birthday to celebrate just four days later Hennie was anxious to go ahead with a full blown party in the park at Fullerton where we now lived. She was amazing! With four children in five years we now felt our 'quiver' was full. We had a complete family – something that both Hennie and I had always wanted in view of our own lonely experiences growing up. Besides, living away from our countries of birth our children would be our only family to relate to on a personal basis.

Except we did have some family connections in USA. Hennie had an uncle and aunt from Holland living in San Jose so we had good contact with them while living in California. Uncle John was anxious to check me out – and my theology - when they first came to visit in 1977. Happily I checked out OK and we were able to visit them before long and also attend their son Jerry's wedding. Aunt Hennie and Uncle John were both very active in the Christian Reformed Church, though Uncle John worked in quality control at Eimac, the company that



Fullerton Community Church meeting Kongsy and family at airport

made the transmitter valves used in many of FEBC's transmitters. Strange coincidence.

While in our La Habra house we had a Lao family stay with us for a few weeks, refugees whom our Fullerton church had agreed to sponsor. Kongsy, Noi and Thongsouk had a lot to learn - and so did our church! - and staying with us helped provide a bit of a cushion until they got their own accommodation and Kongsy found a job as a machinist.



Main Street in Disneyland

The outdoor life in California was quite attractive, but the constant sunshine coupled with the heat we found quite trying. Happily the humidity was very low but that also increased the fire risk. We remember when a whole street of houses close to where we lived in Fullerton was wiped out in a couple of hours one morning in a blaze triggered by the dry Santa Ana winds that blew off the desert. The wood-shake roofs offered no protection from the flames that leapt from roof to roof, apparently ignited by palm fronds set ablaze by overhead electric lines sparking.

Living only five miles from Disneyland, just down the road in Anaheim, meant we often went there with visitors from overseas, of which there were quite a few. Happily in those

days we were able to get discounted rates so it was quite affordable. When our children were small many of the rides were unsuitable for them so we had to be content with The Enchanted Tiki House, and Pirates of the Caribbean, but when we returned a few years later it was our turn to be scared! Hennie conveniently excused herself to take Anita to the dentist while I hung on for dear life when the boys took me on Rocky Mountain Railroad! We also had Knotts Berry Farm nearby and Universal Studios in Hollywood as alternatives.

What I missed most was to have rivers and woodlands like I had as a boy when growing up in Caversham. The beech trees and bluebells of my childhood were nowhere to be found. It seemed as though Americans, apart from enjoying the beaches, expect to pay for their entertainment and leisure time. There were some nature trails that we found but perhaps the most enjoyable outdoor excursion was to the Joshua Tree National Park which was in the desert toward Palm Springs. We found it to be exquisitely beautiful and extremely clean and colourful. It was very photogenic with the Joshua trees (cactus with arms) and rocky outbreaks. The stars at night could be seen right down to the horizon.

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One day our children decided they wanted to go fishing. I somehow knew that day would come – and it was not something I relished. My own experience as a boy fishing beside the Thames in Marlow had left an unforgettably bad memory. But I took a deep breath and

agreed. I asked Chong Lee where he recommended and he suggested a good park nearby, with a fishing lake. So one Saturday afternoon we headed out in the car armed with fishing rods and basic equipment. After two hours we had caught nothing and the kids were getting restless.

Monday morning in the office and Lee asked me how our expedition had gone – and how many fish we had caught. None, I told him. He was most surprised and felt sorry for us, so the following week he came with us to show us how. Apparently the fish in this lake were generally found about thirty centimetres below the surface – and they liked worms. We followed his guidelines – and unbelievably we were soon catching a fish every few minutes!

When visitors came to visit we enjoyed taking them to Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale to see the magnificent paintings of the Crucifixion by Polish artist Jan Styka and the Resurrection. Both of these vast paintings are on view in a special auditorium built on the summit of this beautiful funeral park. Well worth seeing and experiencing!

Many friends had assumed we were in the USA to stay, but that was not the way God was leading us.

Meanwhile our children were growing up and starting school. Malcolm first went to a community nursery school in Fullerton before transferring to a junior school nearby. I used to drop him off on my motorbike, on my way to La Mirada every morning.

Many friends had assumed we were in the USA to stay, but that was not the way God was leading us. We knew that when he

directed it would be time to leave – possibly for a return to Asia when the time was right. Ever since moving to California, Hennie and I had been wondering about what the future might hold for us as a family. Our employment was now with FEBC. Feelings of destiny had become a reality – but it needed to be confirmed. And if it proved to be correct, the next question was about location. Where should we settle?

As our family grew we had moved out of our La Habra apartment and bought our very first home. It was tough and go since our monthly income was less than \$1000, but we enjoyed enthusiastic support from a Christian realtor friend through whom we bought an old property in La Habra. It was in such a state that we had to constantly remind ourselves that it “had potential” and set about fixing it up. It was just a short distance from Richard Nixon's former law office on the High Street.



Our first house - in La Habra

With our growing family we enjoyed a happy time there. We had a corner plot with a large front unfenced garden. The back garden

was small but it had a swing-set and a sandbox which was good for two small boys.

The house was a bit of a challenge in terms of maintenance. It seemed that every square inch of it needed painting since it was of wooden construction. Soon after we moved in a number of church friends showed up one evening to give us a house-warming party. As we stood around outside enjoying a warm, dry California evening we noticed what looked like smoke



Fun in the garden

coming up through a ground-level air vent. Were we on fire? One of the older members, Carl, offered to help so came back the next morning, and under his direction I went down into the crawl space under the house to investigate.

Sure enough one of the galvanised steel pipes in the hot water line had nearly rusted through and was spewing steam. Carl then told me what I needed to do so we went to the lumber store, found tools, universal joints and some extra piping. Then taking a hacksaw I took out the bad piece of pipe and replaced it! Job done!

But, as often happens in house repair, one job led to another. I began to explore under the house (I had never been down there before) and found one long beam caked with dried earth. It looked very suspicious so I attacked it with my trowel. To my dismay I found that this key beam had been eaten through by termites! So I called the termite company that had provided the certificate when we bought it. They came and examined it, and agreed the beam needed replacing. It took three days to

reinstate the damage and make the house secure - and all at no cost. I was enjoying being a handyman again – and this time in our very own house, our first.

But we only lived there two years before an opportunity arose for us to move to nearby Fullerton in 1980. It was a much newer house with a pleasant back garden already planted with a variety of fruit trees. The largest was a grapefruit tree (which did exceptionally well after the paddling pool had spilt all its water!). We also had a fig tree (what do we do with the figs?), a lime tree, an apricot and a loquats tree (which took a while to identify). It was closer to the Fullerton C&MA church we attended where we did some cleaning and gardening to help supplement our income. But we only were to live in it for two years...

We had some good friends in the church who would come and help with babysitting. One lady took Malcolm to La Brea Tar Pits for the day – a most interesting discovery for the entire family in later days. There were also activities, like Awana, which Malcolm enjoyed. Hennie joined the ladies' group and I led the adult Sunday School class that preceded the morning service.

We also got into camping and bought a fairly large tent which we took with us to the annual Canyon Meadows camp site north of Los Angeles. The weather was perfect, and cooking our food outside was great fun. Especially memorable was the hay ride under the stars on our last night before we left to come home.

*The stars
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The stars literally shone overhead, and the Milky Way was alive with light. How sad that in our urbanised world where there is now so much air pollution, we rarely get to enjoy these spectacular views of the heavens.

In March 1981 I set out on a trip to Asia. It was my first as General Program Director and was intended to be exploratory as well as giving me an introduction to FEBC's international leaders. It took me to South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and then ended up in Manila, Philippines, at the FEBC Strategy Conference. I found it exciting exploring new territory, but it was not so much fun for Hennie at our new home in Fullerton, caring for our four children and ferrying the boys to and from nursery school.

About that time I was also exploring doing further study, and it was Fuller Seminary that drew my attention. It had a great philosophy of education, giving students the tools to do their study but stopping short of telling them what they needed to know. This open-ended approach appealed to me. When I went there to explore possibilities of further study, in the likelihood that we might be moving back to Asia, it was suggested that I might try a new course that was attracting a lot of attention and which they were excited about. It was MC510 – Signs, Wonders and Church Growth – to be jointly led by Dr Peter Wagner and John Wimber.

It seemed like a marvellous opportunity and so I enrolled in the course taught one night a week beginning in January 1982. I enjoyed it very much. In one of the classes Rev. David Watson from York, UK, was introduced and I had opportunity to chat

with him during the break. It was around the time that he was diagnosed with terminal cancer though that was not yet made public.

Studying under John Wimber also gave us an excuse to visit the original Vineyard church that met in the gymnasium of Yorba Linda High School. This earned it the nickname of 'Sweatshop Cathedral.' Hennie and I sometimes went there on a Sunday evening and enjoyed the style of worship and ministry, with the body ministering to the body. It was also the birthplace of a number of well-known Christian songs of that era – like the Spirit Song – by John Wimber himself. Vineyard



Ready for Manila

churches spread rapidly becoming a worldwide phenomenon, and it was our privilege to have engaged with the very first during those exciting days.

A new era in our lives was beginning... and both Hennie and I were looking forward to it with some degree of excitement tinged with healthy trepidation. Strangely enough there were no distractions to pull us in any other direction....

Note:

This is a draft of the fifth 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: Studio portrait of our family after Paul was born in 1980