Estacada by the River
By Bill Williamson

I tipped the beer and gulped the last quarter glass down. Last call, and it was closing time. I rose, steadying myself with one hand on the rocking table, and focused through the dim lit room at the far door with the exit light above it and worked hard to stay in a straight line toward it. I reached the door and stepped out into the damp night air.

It was 2:00 A.M. and I was ten miles of narrow winding road from my home in Colton.

I looked across the empty parking lot and gazed at my Suzuki waiting for me. It was a 1000cc Suzuki motorcycle that had been rated by Cycle World that year as, ‘the fastest thing on two wheels.’ But this particular cycle had headers added, and the carburetors had been fitted with performance jets, boosting the horsepower by another seventeen over the large amount the cycle already had.

I slowly staggered to the cycle in my drunken stupor and threw my leg across the seat. I sat there in the dark for a moment, not sure what step was next. I brought the bike to the straight up position and pressed the starter. Nothing happened, just the sound of the starter and an engine turning without firing. I tried again, and again, and again.

Fog was beginning to roll up over the river bank into the parking lot of the Shingle Mill Tavern. I tried again, and nothing. But this time ‘nothing’ meant that the starter wouldn’t even turn the engine over. The battery was dead. How many times I had cranked the engine to get it going I didn’t know, but I know the battery was in top condition. I had simply worn it down in my attempts to start the cycle.

I awoke in a strange house the next morning, not sure how I had gotten there. I rose quietly and slipped out the door, crossed the porch and stopped on the sidewalk. I got my bearings and walked toward my bike.

Estacada was a small Oregon logging town that was perched on the banks of the Clackamas River. Logging was at its peak and it was a busy little town. Forest Service activity was still very needed and that is what drew me there.

I worked for, and retired from the US Forest Service after twenty-five years of federal service. For fifteen of those years I lived around Estacada.

Estacada was different from the dry Okanogan Valley of Washington state where I grew up and worked the first eight years of my Forest Service career. Estacada was hammered by the infamous Oregon rain day in, and day out. That same rain created a lush mountain landscape of timber second to none. The trees were the tallest, and the wood from them the best. Timber yields per acre was some of the highest in the world, and that yield created jobs. And I had one of them.
I worked in roadway engineering and was a workaholic in one sense of the word; I worked more than I should have. Often I would work forty hours a week on my own work and then work weekends to help others meet their deadlines too. Of course I received good pay for the effort, and a few cash awards along the way.

But, there was a price to pay, both for me, and my family.

That wasn’t the only problem with my lifestyle though. I had been on a crash course with disaster since my teen years when I went into the Army to get away from my small hometown of Tonasket in Eastern Washington state. I remember standing at the juke box in the Tiger’s Den, our favorite hangout, dropping nickels in and listening to Rusty Draper’s song, ‘Freight Train,’ and the lyrics, ‘I don’t care what train I’m on, just as long as it keeps rolling on.’

And sure enough, at seventeen I did roll on. Oh, I came back after serving three years in the Army, but didn’t stay too long before the urge to ‘roll on’ hit me again. I landed in Estacada this time, but there was a difference. This time I had a wife and two daughters.

My two daughters were born in Washington state. But they spent many of their years growing up in Estacada. My oldest still lives in Oregon not far from Estacada, but the youngest is across the Pacific in Hawaii. It has been many years since their mother and I divorced.

But, lets go back to the Estacada episode and my waiting motorcycle.

I could feel every one of my steps as my head pounded each time my foot hit the concrete. I was hung-over, and it was a good one. The walk to the Shingle Mill seemed a long one.

I didn’t remember much from the night before, only that the bike would not start.

I reached the bike, where the key was still hanging in the ignition. I once again straddled the bike seat and sat down. I pulled the bike upright, turned the key and hit the starter. This time the engine exploded into motion with that familiar roar from the twin headers. There was nothing wrong with the bike, nor the battery. I was puzzled.

I made the ride home very slowly and deliberately, wondering all the way, what had just happened in the last eight hours.

I was at a turning point in my life. I was divorced, drinking too much, flirting too much, accepting too many options in the late night, and just rolling down the wrong highway of life. I needed a crossroads to get off on, and I needed one badly.

Weeks passed before that crossroad would come one night in Colton while I was home alone.

I sat on the hardwood floor of the beautiful three-level house I had built to hold me and my wife with our two kids. The custom house was our dream home and it sat on ten beautiful wooded acres, and the fifty-year-old stand of Douglas Fir and Alders made it possible to see it only from the air. It was a happy house when we first moved in, but it was anything but happy now. My ex-wife and daughters lived forty minutes away in another town, and I was only home when I wasn’t working or at a bar in town.

The sun had slipped over the horizon and there were no lights on in the house. I sat on the floor of the living room where the ceiling loomed above me twenty-four feet. The loft master bedroom was there somewhere in darkness.

I finished another beer and pitched the empty can over my shoulder. The can glanced off the wall behind me onto the hardwood floor and rolled several feet before coming to rest in the corner, where the others had gone. I reached into the open half case of beer beside me and pulled another out and snapped the pull tab to the sound of air swishing out of the can.

I hadn’t planned an excursion into a mind numbing state, but there I was again, sad, lonely, and unable to calculate a way out of it.
I had figured all of my life I could do anything set before me if I were only given the chance to try. Dad had taught me that I could, indeed, do anything. I believed him and that belief in my own ability had helped in the work place. But it had not helped me in guiding my life in the right direction and protecting my family from being torn apart.

The ‘dream house’ was empty and dark, and I was at the end of myself.

Somewhere in the darkness I found the TV remote and hit the on-button. A burst of light launched out of the set and illuminated the room. I stared at the screen as Billy Graham pointed in my direction and addressed me, ‘and you there at home, you need Christ right now.’

I was shocked as I looked past his pointing finger, along his arm and into those penetrating eyes. I knew what he said was true, I needed something badly, and maybe it was Jesus. I had said a prayer to receive Jesus Christ as my savior when I was a boy of thirteen. That was twenty-seven years earlier and I had come to doubt there was even a god in the years since then. I had wandered far from any faith I had gained from the boyhood experience.

My eyes were heavy while I listened to Mr. Graham explain why I needed Jesus. I couldn’t argue with one single point, and when he explained that I could pray along with him, accepting Christ into my life with repentance of my sins, and begin anew, I jumped at the chance. I whispered the words as Billy led me. I made a commitment to follow Jesus from that day forward.

I threw the rest of the beer away, and everything began changing in my life. I saw color that I hadn’t seen in years. I was so enthralled in the creation around me that I began photographing everything I saw anew. The sunrises, sunsets, flowers, and meadows, all amazed me. I couldn’t get enough of the beauty of things around me.

I lost my taste for alcohol, and lost any desire to spend time in bars. I joined some friends a few times in the Shingle Mill, but I would only drink soda and found noise increased as the beer flowed. There seemed to be nothing to hold me there and I would leave soon after arrival, just slipping out of the noisy crowd and going home.

The parties that I had frequented also held no thrill for me any longer. I simply faded away from that scene completely. My life was changing greatly.

Don’t get me wrong. I didn’t just drop all my immoral behavior. That took some time. I tried, and failed over and over again. But each time I seemed to come up with my head a little higher out of the water, and soon I was well on my way to working on new challenges in my life. I was in a process of losing my old, selfish, sinful self, and gaining a new life of following Jesus in righteousness. I liked the change.

I was finally able to sell the ‘dream house’ and moved into an apartment in Gresham. Little did I know that my life was to take an even harder turn toward truth.

There was much talk of President Reagan’s plan to reduce government and reduction of the federal work force was part of that talk. There was a buzz around our office about ‘Early Outs.’ That is, opportunity for an early retirement. The story was, if you had twenty-five years of federal service, regardless of your age, you may qualify for an ‘Early Out.’

This was the very year that I qualified and I applied. I would have the required twenty-five years in October.

I was told by the Personnel Department that I was barking up the wrong tree. I was only forty-two years old and they had never let someone that young retire, and I was not going to be the first. I argued that I met the only requirement and insisted they take my application and let the chips’ fall where they may. My application was received reluctantly.

I had specified December 30 for a departure date. I waited.
The news came, my application for ‘Early Out’ had been approved.

I had downsized my lifestyle dramatically six months before the departure date arrived and was living on the much smaller retirement annuity that was expected. I managed quite well and when December 30 arrived I loaded my meager belongings into my Dodge Van and left the cold, wet, Oregon weather behind, and headed down the freeway with Arizona ahead of me and a sense of freedom in the air.

I spent the winter in Arizona walking the washes with my camera, still unable to get enough of God’s beauty on film. When spring arrived, I headed north into Montana country, stopping in Missoula and buying a Wenonah canoe to mount on top of the van. I hopped from lake to lake enjoying life like I never had.

At one point I was at a high mountain lake with my canoe pulled up into the blooming Bear Grass on the lake bank, as I lay in my portable trail hammock stretched between two Fir Trees. I set my camera on a tripod and took a photo of myself lying in the hammock and my cowboy-hat pulled down over my eyes, the canoe, Bear Grass, and lake in the background.

I sent the photo to a friend and asked him to post it on the bulletin board at the office for those who had chosen not to take advantage of the ‘Early Out’ opportunity.

Something unexpected happened as I lay in the hammock pondering this new wonderful life. I heard distinctly the word, ‘Missionary.’ It was as though someone whispered it to me. But, this was not the first time I had heard that word spoken to me. It happened once before as I hiked a dry wash in Arizona.

The first time I just brushed the incident off. This time I formed a reply that went like this, ‘How can I give up this life, and all this?’ I looked around at the canoe, lake and beauty.

I soon met a new friend who introduced me to Youth With A Mission, YWAM, that summer. I visited one of their bases of operation in Lakeside, Montana. I spent the week there listening to some great spiritual teaching, and wonderful praise music. That was a week that changed my life direction and I was on a new course. A course that was not discovered, nor orchestrated by me, but one designed and guided by God Himself.

Estacada and that motorcycle ride were far behind me and the following years were filled with adventures that led me to countries on the far side of the globe, and back. God saved me from a disastrous cycle ride that late night because he had work for me to do. I heard the call on my life and have never regretted giving him the reigns of my life.

I recall a day when I lay in the warmth of the sun on a formation of rocks overlooking the South China Sea. I remembered asking God while laying in that hammock back in Montana, ‘How can I give up all this?’ I had answered God’s call to be a missionary, and I hadn’t given up anything, but had gained so much more.

Many years have passed since that fateful night on the banks of the Clackamas River in the Shingle Mill parking lot. I have not looked back and God has taken me on adventures in many far away places. And he has never abandoned me, nor forsaken me. He is right there with me every moment providing that guidance I missed the first forty years of my life.

All those problem areas of my previous life have grown ‘strangely dim’ in my past. My future looks very bright, and it will last for eternity because I decided to put my trust in Jesus Christ and turn away from a sinful life to his delightful leadership.