

Oral History interview with Allan Lorimer

Allan Lorimer: I was just about to get married. Dr. Coffin^{*1} said, "Not him again!" He's a first-year man. We have some regulations that no students can get married, none ever has been married, and no student can go to a church until his last year for field work." A student said, "Allan isn't just another student. He has two years' work. He has far more in his head than any of us has in the study of theology here." Dr. Coffin wanted to see my father in church. He said I attend that church in Sound Beach. He said you're a member of the Christian Church.

(Mary and I are going to get married.) In the meantime my wife had come up from the South to study at Teachers' College graduate course and she and I had met and "just like that" we fell in love, so we decided we'd get married. She was teaching in a Christian Science school. We decided to get married in April. Warren said to Ed Grant^{*2}, "You tell Dr. Coffin that there's only one man you recommend that's had experience - that doesn't need teaching and preaching, doesn't need homiletics - he's got plenty of philosophy." Ed wrote to Dr. Coffin. Dr. Coffin said "I'm not interested in the Congregational Church. I'm not interested in the Yankees or New England." Ed said, "But do you have anyone here this evening that you can recommend?" "It just so happens I do. Allan Lorimer." (I can remember this like yesterday!) Dr. Coffin said, "My heavens, what would that man do! His mother always said he would be." Why was it I was president of that class when I graduated from Union Seminary? It didn't mean anything.

So finally Ed Grant from Columbia called up Dr. Coffin and said, "Have you found anyone?" Dr. Coffin said, "I'm afraid so!" "Why did you say that, Dr. Coffin?" "This is a man with a touch of fate like I've never seen before, but with nerve." That's what it was.

So, they arranged for luncheon at the faculty club at Columbia. Before I went over there, Dr. Coffin called me and said, "Now, I don't expect you to be chosen -- I don't want you to be chosen. You've got no right to be chosen, but I can't get any satisfactory student for the kind of job that that entails for at least a month. Perhaps after Easter I can." So I went over there and had lunch with Mr. Binney and Mr. Grant. They were right down my alley and I guess I was down theirs, too, because we just had a wonderful time. They asked me if I could come up next Sunday. I said, "Sure." They didn't say anything about finances.

I was down to about \$10. I had just about enough money to get down to Sound Beach because now that \$100 I was making was eaten up by expenses - I had to buy new clothes and all that sort of stuff. After I had luncheon with them they said, "Next Sunday. We'll meet you at the station." I asked how do I get up there. You take the 7th Avenue Subway, then you take the Shuttle. So I went down there and Dr. Coffin said, "What are you going to preach about?" "Why I went into the ministry." He said, "Good. Don't forget the line, make it your subject." I said, "What is it?" He said, "God will find a way."

So I went up there and met Ed Grant and Allan Kitchel. Old Greenwich was really without a church. There weren't the best morals in the community at that time, I found out later. They got together out at the country club and said, "We want a church! We want a community church. That's what we need." So Allan Kitchel and Ed Grant told me that. So I went out there. They were in this garden and it was terrible and it was wet and you had to have umbrellas going inside the church because the roof was leaking. I remember that day! I'll never forget Bob Starr, remember him? "Oh sure." He said "... directions in your hand, but then you have an umbrella over your head." He said maybe this minister will be able to produce miracles and we'll be able to stop it. Well, I didn't.

We went down to Kitchel's for dinner. Ed Grant went down to Kitchel's for dinner. I met the family, and met the Binney's mother who said, "I don't want to see a fine young man like you come here. You'll be ruined." And her husband said, "What do you mean, ruined? He's got you, he's got Allan Kitchel, and he's got Ed Grant." Edwin Binney had made a real fortune - he was quite a man - you know, Crayola Crayons, but he was also president of Columbian Carbon Company. He invented the process by which the gray tires we used to have are now black. Remember we used to have to change them and buy new tires every three or four thousand miles. He invented this process of putting carbon in those tires. That's how he made his fortune.

I went down to Sound Beach to preach and in trooped about half a dozen people. All of them New York suburban people. Ed Grant said, "Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and the Sunday after that is Easter. Will you take these two Sundays anyway?" I said, "Sure." He said, "What do you think we should do for Palm Sunday?" I said this quartet you've got is awful. He said we know it. I said there is a man in New York by the name of Jim Price who I happen to know who runs an agency for getting soloists and if a man's not working at the Metropolitan or giving a concert, if he's back home looking for \$25, Jimmy gets him a job - Jimmy takes \$2 and gets him a job. I said I'd like to see this church get a soloist for the next two Sundays. He said will you arrange for that? I said, "Sure, you pay for it?" He said oh sure we'll pay for it. Money didn't mean anything to them. I called up Jimmy Price (I had met him because we had arranged through his agency for concerts) and he said, "Well, Allan, it just so happens that Fred Patton is in town. He did his last Metropolitan - Faust - last week. Great big bass voice. Send him out. So we came out together. I called Ed Grant and he got hold of Viola Worrell and she got an organ tuner and they tried to make something out of nothing. She heard Fred Patton was coming and she knew all about him from the Metropolitan Opera. She'd read about him and she was scared. She didn't know me from Adam, either, except that I'd preached there the Sunday before. So I brought him up to the church and we walked up to the church from the station. It was a beautiful day I remember. I introduced him. He said, "What would you like to have me sing?" She said something very simple. He said do you have any solos here? She said yes, we have some, but not the kind that you could sing. "The Balm of Giliad?" "No." Do you know another one? How about "The Hymn?"

I came out on the train with this young fellow. We speak the same language. He thought he got on the end of a shoestring and so did I. Being in a problem isn't all what you think it is. Fred was paying alimony. "When he gets through, I'll go through your hymns and I'll give you a hymn." She said all right. They stayed there and practiced.

Fred and I walked through the cemetery of which I was later to become superintendent. He said, "Allan, this is beautiful. Those people are rip-roaring. I suppose most of the people who will be here are college and university graduates." I said yes they are. He said there'll be these old Yanks here too? I said yes there will. He said, well we want to get them both together. I said, "I think the college-university people will take anything, but these old Yanks are on the defensive." He said, "Okay, I'll have to think about my final hymn."

The Palm Sunday service was at 11:00. They started to come at quarter past and half past 10. Pretty soon it grew and grew and grew. The church was jam packed. We had to open the stained glass windows. There were no chairs so people went out and stood and sat on the cemetery lawn. I was scared, boy was I scared. This is the kind of thing you never hear about, you know. You read about it. So we started the service, we had the hymn, the scripture reading, and I had to make it as loud as I could. The choir sang. And Whit Roberts, who had been a member of the Apollo Club in Brooklyn

before he moved to Sound Beach, of course, knew Fred Patton because Fred used to be the soloist for the Apollo Club. It was beautiful. Nothing like that had ever happened in Sound Beach.

Well, it came time for the collection and we had two terrible collection plates - only two, but that was two too many I guess for the old timers. And here was all this mass of people outside, (I didn't know what to do because I knew two collection plates wouldn't take care of this mob) so I said to Ed Grant what do you want me to do about the collection plates - we have two plates. (He knew he'd hear all about it the next day on the commuters' train to New York. I came to find they discussed me and my sermon on that 7:59 from Old Greenwich every day). He said, "Bob Starr has a Derby hat and Tom H. has a Derby hat and Mr. Voorhies, I see that you have a Derby hat. I think we should have collections in Derbies. We have to have three more hats for outside. I want two men whom I can trust to go with me outside and the rest of you take the formal collection." So Allan Kitchel and three fellows - they didn't know what to do - they came up there ... they stood in front of me and for the first time I was out of words. I just thought, "God help me, say something." I still don't know to this day what I said. Then I went back and sang this offertory.

They came back and the place was just crowded with dollar bills - ten dollar bills. Those fellows all with guilty consciences in all likelihood hadn't been to church in years. So I went out after church - I borrowed a choir gown from Union Seminary - they refused to go home, waiting for me. Fred Patton came out with me, "Should we take the next train?" I said, "Sure." Allan Kitchel said, "You and Mr. Patton are coming down to my house for dinner. We're going to have a short meeting afterward if you can attend." Fred Patton said, "I'll come to dinner, but I'm not going to any meeting." Kitchel said fine. We went down there and there were about twelve people that they had asked to come in, so they asked me if I'd come out. They'd fix up the parsonage, approve my getting married on the sixteenth of April which was at the end of the next week, and said what would you do for furniture? I don't know, I said. Well, we'll do something they said. I said fine. One of them said how do you pay you fellas? I said I don't know. They said, Ed, can't we put the whole thing in your control? Ed said "I'll take care of it." Ed met me for lunch on Tuesday and said, "This is an instructive contract that we have for Columbia University and I'm just changing it. We're going to pay you your home and a salary of \$2,500 a year, which in those days was three days a week, was pretty darn good." I said fine. He said will you sign it? I said, "Sure, I trust you." They had forgotten to talk to Dr. Coffin. He said, "A Minister never has a contract. Professor Grant, you should know that." Ed said, "I just thought it would be about the same as Columbia University." He said, "No, a minister is called to a church and theoretically he's called for life. And furthermore, you can't call him because he's not ordained, and he can't be ordained for three more years because he's a freshman in the seminary." Well, Ed said, "Dr. Coffin, I didn't hear that conversation. Dr. Coffin, you're in the Presbyterian Church and we're Congregational and we can do anything we want to. We still can be an independent church as long as the people vote." So I signed it and went out there on Easter Sunday. It was another beautiful day. I took Mary out with me, now my wife, and they fell in love with her; anyone would. So that's how we came to Old Greenwich. I remember Mother Binney giving Mary and me \$250. She knew we didn't have any money. The people in the parish were wonderful.

I was ordained in October of my sophomore year. Dr. Coffin came up and gave a sermon. Fred Patton came out and sang. So we had a beginning that no other church I've known could possibly have. The first Sunday after I was ordained we took in 68 members, which right off gave the new people a majority on any vote. So then we had the old fashioned society and the old-fashioned church. We not only had the First Congregational Church, but also the first Congregational Ecclesiastical Society which operated the cemetery and the church. So we joined them both together through our lawyer, Bob Starr, and so it became The First Congregational Church of Sound Beach.

Do you remember what my father said? He said that a minister will never have the freedom to speak out. I had had trouble. My wife's father had had his resignation demanded as superintendent of schools in North Carolina by the Ku Klux Klan. And two or three of them started to come to church here. I knew it was unchristian, but I couldn't welcome them because they had put their loyalty to the Klan above their loyalty to the church. They came out to watch what ministers were preaching about. In the meantime, the American Legion was getting into political pressure in our whole nation. They appointed a committee on vigilance in the state of Connecticut and they had members in Greenwich and they were to investigate the school principals, teachers and preachers - everything that was said and taught. You don't remember this, but these were serious times. After I'd been there a few years, I said to Mary, "I don't want you to go to church next Sunday because I'm going to preach a sermon that you won't like - all that controversy against all that southern charm and graciousness." She said, "Why get in all that hot water?" So I called up Harold Palmer, who was the editor of the Greenwich Press, (the result of which he came to church and became the superintendent of our Sunday School). I asked him to be in church on Sunday because I would like to have quotations publicized. It's 4th of July weekend and it has to do with patriotism, and it's negative, but I don't want to be misquoted by any group. He said, "All right, I'll take down the whole sermon." He came to church and the church was very, very well filled plus a lot of summer people. My first line was, "I'm putting my faith in the Congregational freedom of speech for which my ancestors going back to Governor Bradford fought and died. So my text today, my own words, I hope you'll provide me with understanding."

"The four most dangerous institutions in the United States of America today are 1. The Ku Klux Klan, 2. The American Legion, 3. The Daughters of the American Revolution, and 4. The Anti-Saloon League." You could have heard a pin drop. The whole sermon was spent - I gave each one about seven minutes. Palmer said, "This ought to be in the New York Times, Allan." I said, "What do you mean?" He said, "You know, I don't know what type of church you have here." "This will be a test." He said it should/would be with me. He said he wouldn't write an editorial, but he did print the whole sermon.

At the next Trustees meeting (Allan Kitchel was chairman), I expected repercussions, but I didn't get any, so I brought it up. We wanted to form a joint church council combining the Trustees and the Deacons. I said, "Gentlemen, I'm sorry about last Sunday, but I just felt I had to do it to get it off my conscience." Allan Kitchel said, "Allan, there was a great disagreement with what you had to say." Not that I wasn't right, but I picked the wrong day and I exploited the pulpit. But he said, "Just remember, in the language of Voltaire, we brought you here and Dr. Coffin said that this is where you were going to learn the hard way and we'll fight the last ditch for you to say what is on your mind and on your conscience, whether we agree with you or not. This is a good time for us as a church before explosion begins around town. They took a vote and they unanimously backed me. That's one of the few times in my life I really cried, out of just appreciation.

Then the American Legion came over and demanded my resignation. Fortunately I was on a vacation in North Carolina. They sent a special delivery letter to me stating "You will appear in your study at such and such a time." I wrote back and said, "I can't be there. I'm on vacation." I talked to Dean McIntosh down there and showed him the letter. He said it was about time somebody stepped on the American Legion. We're doing the best we can against the Klan down here in North Carolina, but there's a book that's just come out by Marcus Duffield, it's called "King Legion." It took all these experiences of the American Legion where they tried to bring un-American pressure on freedom. (The main occasion for my doing this on the 4th of July was they had just fired the head of the history department at Greenwich High School for having said in his history class that perhaps there were two

sides to the Revolutionary War. "Perhaps the British did have a side." The kids came home and told their American Legion fathers. They held a meeting right away and that's how the vigilante committee got a hold of it. Then I preached the sermon. That was the straw that broke the camel's back. So we decided in Sound Beach with Harold Palmer that we'd get the three of us together and take care of the whole thing. McIntosh said no. He said, "Have that meeting with the American Legion, but here are some of the things to tell them. Allan Kitchel had given me a box of twenty Double Corona cigars (they were the best you could get). He said just put them on your desk - you might want to use them. I said I know what you mean. So, they came in (it was 1931 or 32). They were wearing not their Legion uniforms, but the uniforms they wore in the US Army and Navy. Those who had been lean had grown fat and those who had been fat had grown lean and they looked like a bunch of glorified Boy Scouts.

I brought them into the study and asked them to sit down. They said, "No." I offered them a cigar; I said, "Will you have one?" "No." I sat down very comfortably in the study, took a cigar, started smoking it and said, "What can I do for you?" "We want a direct retraction and public apology from you for the statement that you made." I said, "What was the statement?" They said, "First or all, we don't mind so much being classified with the Ku Klux Klan or with the Anti-Saloon League, but when you accuse us of going to bed with the Daughters of the American Revolution, that's a bit too much."

They said, "What are you going to do - apologize?" I said, "I won't." They said we're going to take steps demanding your resignation. I said, "You already have made that threat. You don't have any legal grounds whatsoever. Here you are, in the American Legion, supposedly men who are willing to risk your life for American freedom, the most precious freedom of which is the freedom of speech. And here is the American Legion, like the Ku Klux Klan, using the Ku Klux Klan's methods, curtailing the freedom of speech of a minister and the freedom of teaching of a high school history teacher. I not only demand an apology from you, but a retraction, and that you return to the school board and demand that he be reinstated. Now, that's my demand of you (pretending to be very angry). Do you want to think it over?"

And there they were standing there. I said, "You're in a Christian church here. Sit down, have a cigar, I know some of you smoke." They all lighted their cigars up. "What do you think we can do?" The next day, Bill Cook and Allan Kitchel made an agreement together. They went over this fella's garage, he was one of the commanders of the Legion. I think his name was Collins, they had always had Cadillacs. Allan Kitchel went in first and said "I'm interested in a new Cadillac, Mr. Collins." "Wonderful." "You give good service?" "Excellent." "Here's one, just what you want, Mr. Kitchel." Allan said, "That's fine." But, I'm thinking about going to Stamford to get my Cadillac. Mr. Collins asked, "Would you mind telling us why?" He said, "Well, you're persecuting our minister over there whom we love, and I don't like to see any of that money going into the American Legion." He walked out.

Bill Cook went in and told Mr. Collins he wanted a new Cadillac just like the one he had. Mr. Collins said he had just what he wanted. Cook got in it and said, "Yes, this is wonderful, but maybe I better go over to Stamford." The Cadillac agent asked why. Cook said, "I think I'm losing confidence in you." "You mean in the company, in the Cadillac?" "No, in you." "Why?" "Well, you want to destroy our whole community over there in Sound Beach, Old Greenwich. You're going to take our minister away. You're going to split our church in half. We've got a community we love. It was a very united church. I don't think I want to do business with that kind of man, with that kind of group he represents." He stomped out mad.

Well, they both called me up that night and said, "Allan, you're not supposed to know this, but the

local board of the Legion got in contact with the State Vigilante Committee and they decided it would be wiser not to do anything and you'll be getting a letter." So I got a letter from the American Legion saying that "due to newly-found information, they decided not to go ahead in taking any further steps against me and they would send me an apology if I would send them one. On the other hand, they would prefer that each of us would say to the other, forgive and forget."

Several of us got together with Mr. Wade^{*3} and appointed a committee and we built the Perrot Library. So one night, I was down at Mr. Binney's and there was Mother Binney. They were wonderful to me. Allan Kitchel and the Binneys and my wife were there. Their son June Binney had just died. Mrs. Binney said she wanted to make a memorial for June. We have the Parish House in the church. Mr. Binney said they went by that "awful swamp" across from the church and thought that could be made into a beautiful park. It was owned by Cyrus Miller in New York. "He's a skinflint and he wants to keep it for future development, but we don't want any kind of apartment house (they didn't have any zoning laws then). I'd like to buy it and make it into a beautiful park in memory of June, but Cyrus knows all about me and furthermore he knows that I want to buy it, so his price has gone way, way up, so it's prohibitive and he thinks I'll meet that price. So I'd like to ask you if you'd be good enough to talk with Cyrus Miller and give him a community story. Mr. Binney said he'd go up to \$30,000.

So I went in on a train with Allan Kitchel and got off at 125th Street and met Cyrus at the Edgar Allen Poe House. He took me through it and then I said "I'd like to have a talk with you." We sat out on the porch and he said, "Did Ed Binney send you here as his agent? Tell me why I should sell you my property for a measly \$30,000." I said, "Right, I couldn't put that any more succinctly." He said, "What's your argument? I said, "I haven't any, goodbye!" He said "Wait a minute." I said, "Goodbye, Mr. Miller. I'm sorry you told me this Edgar Allen Poe House was not the original, but there are very few people who know it. And you didn't even rehabilitate the original. You put up a fake house and nobody knows it. If that's the kind of man I know I'm going to have to deal with, I know I won't get to first base. I don't know anything about that kind of business. It's too flim flummy for me. It's against my ethics. Goodbye." He said "Wait a minute" and took me to lunch at some club in the Bronx. He said at lunch, "Before we talk about business, let me ask you something about religion. I've never been to a church in my life."

That's all I needed. He became pretty mellow and then he began asking questions. I began to see he needed religion. "You're asking me for religion, aren't you?" He said, "Yes, I am." I asked why. He said, "Not one of my employees has ever stood up to me like you have, that's why I first admired you. I just wanted to see if you had any guts. That's why I asked you for religion. Now I know I really need it. But I need it in a different way. I've got a lot of courage." I said, "You've got a lot of things to hide, too. And you've got to come straight out with me, Mr. Miller." He said, "Will you have luncheon with me the first Monday of each month for four months?" I said sure, and I did. He became a very serious communicant in a Lutheran church up there.

We went to his law office. He asked me how far Ed Binney really was willing to go, so I told him how he wanted it as a memorial to his son. And I told Cyrus it wouldn't mean anything to him because he didn't have any structure, spiritual or moral, to understand what it is to have a loving memorial in the form of a beautiful park.

*1 Dr. Coffin was Henry Sloan Coffin (1877 – 1954), president of the Union Theological Seminary then.

*2 Ed Grant is the grandfather of our Pastor Emeritus Sally Colegrove. He was Registrar at Columbia U.

*3 D. Everett Wade was an architect. <http://www.perrotlibrary.org/kidshistory4.htm>