

(2) By the Pump House

It was no accident that Odell Mitchell, a navy sailor from the Carolinas, ended up beside an irrigation pump house in the hills of Halawa, Hawaii back in the 1940's. Mitchell, though drafted by Uncle Sam, was in the service of his Heavenly Father. He wanted to follow his Lord's voice, and in the presence of Majesty he would seek great expectations. World War II may have halted his personal plans. He may have been frightened by the prospect of soon being in harm's way; but there, sitting beside the pump house, Odell Mitchell read from his Bible and dreamt of a city whose builder and maker is God.

Upon this foundation of prayer and the word of God, the Spirit began to do His work. The Spirit of God reached out into the little plantation community of Aiea, and as often seems the case, He did not bring the popular, the strong and good-looking, or the most likely to succeed. He brought what to most would seem the unpopular, the downtrodden, and the infirm—in this case, poor plantation workers' children who could only dream of something better.

Minoru Azama, the son of Okinawan immigrants, was the first to run into Odell Mitchell. Minoru had been born with a congenital heart defect and was called a "blue baby." This condition made it difficult for him to do any sport; and as most physically challenged might attest to, he was probably the butt of many jokes no doubt causing him to shy away from the usual intermediate school activities. It is probably safe to say that he had dreams of someday running effortlessly and athletically in Nirvana's cane fields.

It may have been on a day when Minoru's head hung low as he trudged home despondent from again being left out. He may have been gasping for breath as he made his way up the slight incline of that dirt road. It may have been a day when the adventure of being a child gave way to the inner tears and angst that painted a horizon of physical and economic anonymity. But, on this day Minoru saw this strange sailor reading a book he had never seen before.

Wanting to know what book the sailor was reading, Minoru found the courage to go over to the man and ask him the question. No doubt filled with the Spirit of God Mitchell responded. His response included an invitation for Minoru and any others interested to come and study the Bible. The gospel call had been given, and the Spirit of God was waiting for hearts to respond.

We must always remember the strength of Mitchell's love for his Lord. When other sailors may have spent time and money on Hotel Street, Mitchell spent time with his God. It was in the solitude of his devotional life that Mitchell heard the voice of God and found his avenue of service. It was in his walk toward holiness that God spoke through him. God had opened his heart to see a kingdom that even included cast off Okinawan kids, a kingdom that turned the plantation caste system upside down, a kingdom where

the Road to Zion is linked to the hearts of men and not to their checkbooks, appearance or earthly position.

The following day Minoru asked his brother Shoichi and his good friend Kenneth Kakazu, among others, to go with him to hear the words of the Bible. Kenneth Kakazu has described himself back then as “shy, not athletic, and always picked last on the playground.” Kakazu later said: “I went and the first words of the Bible I ever heard were:”

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son that
whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life.
John 3:16

The rag tag bunch of intermediate school kids continued to attend Mitchell’s Bible class there beside the irrigation shack. They were taught some simple religious songs, some other Bible verses, and of course the gospel story. And though Mitchell soon had to leave, he arranged for a second sailor, Gerald Hemmet from Alabama, to conduct the informal class.

Hemmet stayed much longer than Mitchell and was very instrumental in putting to rest some of Ken Kakazu’s spiritualism fears and *obake* house memories. Besides the obake occurrences at the Kakazu residence, Ken had been scared to death after experiencing a séance at Mrs. Azama’s home. Minoru’s mother was known as the town medium, and at that particular séance Ken had run home after hearing what appeared to be the voices of the dead. When Gerald Hemmet went and visited the Azama household, Ken remembers feeling a great sense of peace, and not even being scared of her shrine in the living room. Later he said, “It was like he (Hemmet) had a greater power.”

Hemmet being a Baptist, as was Mitchell, arranged to take the boys to a Baptist church in Nuuanu on Sundays. Many of the boys attended, and several including Ken Kakazu were baptized there into the Baptist faith. Later Ken was also baptized at the Navy Chaplain’s headquarters in Kalihi called “Navigators.”

Soon Hemmet also had to leave. And though he and Mitchell have not been located (attempts have been made), we must always remember their part in the history of this church. At the 50th Anniversary of the Aiea SDA Church, Elder George Kiyabu, Aiea’s first pastor, spoke in honor of the “two Baptist sailors who shared the pure gospel with the boys by the irrigation ditch.” When Ken Kakazu remembers studying the face of Odell Mitchell for the first time (mainly because he had never seen a white person close up), he recalls: “When I looked into the eyes of this man singing *Rock of Ages* there were tears. . . and I felt I was looking into the eyes of God Himself.”

Before Hemmet left he took Ken Kakazu aside. The mood was somber as Hemmet took Ken a ways up into the hills of Halawa. Perhaps Hemmet knew there was no other sailor to be sent to the Bible group. Maybe he was simply sad to leave his new friends. But soon they came to a viewpoint alongside a lone guava tree in some open grassy area. The sun

was setting and for a moment they took in an Oahu sunset with its orange and gold dying over the Waianae Mountains across the Ewa plain and the west loch of Pearl Harbor. They could probably smell the musty *pili* grass. They could probably hear the evening calls of the Shama Thrush and the *Elepaio*, or maybe even the calls of the ducks from the stinky pond of Chinese Camp. But there beside the lone guava tree Ken Kakazu heard the call to gospel ministry as Gerald Hemmet implored him to carry on the Bible study group. He gave Ken a complete Bible. Little did Hemmet know that God had impressed on him to plant a seed that would grow into a life long educator and the beginnings of the Aiea church. No doubt he had seen a vision of what the Bible in the hands of a child could do. As evening came that day so long ago to Aiea, it was really the dawn of something truly better. The ragamuffin kids now had the Bible, and with the Bible, they now had a dream.