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### A Preacher's Wife

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A Preacher's Wife  
by S. Ray Granade  
9/2/2023

Evergreen Baptist Church hired the seminarian as soon as he graduated. Brother Sam, as they would call him, had pastored part-time while in college; this was his first full-time appointment. His age exceeded what one would have expected, but he had laid out a year to raise a crop to sell for college money; worked and preached to put himself through school; and interrupted seminary to serve as a US Army chaplain on convoy duty, in gliders briefly, then as a paratrooper, and mustered out as a major. He'd packed much experience into his twenty-nine years. He'd married during the World War II, so moving from Louisville, Kentucky meant bringing his wife and their pre-school son.

His wife Rubilaw seemed in many ways the antithesis of the Southern Baptist preacher's wife in a small, county-seat town in south Alabama. Born in Washington, DC, she'd been reared in Alabama's state capital as the eldest of three (the other two boys) children to an unlikely pair of parents.

Her mother came from what passed for society in Goshen, Alabama. The Laws possessed much name (think Law's Brigade at Gettysburg) and little money. The family of three girls (her mother, Ruby, was the baby) relied on good marriages to provide their missing equity. Ruby would forever remain extremely conscious of social status, ensuring her daughter's "coming out" as a debutante and the family's conspicuous activity in Montgomery's First Baptist Church. Ruby's husband, Rufus, sprang from a nearby poor farming family. His dying mother and his father chose him to be the family's educated one. In return, they imposed the pact that he remember the family's sacrifice to make that happen and help them in return. Education his ticket "up and out," Rufus swapped produce carted on his bicycle for tuition when possible. At Troy State Teacher's College, he attended until money ran out, then taught school to make enough to go again.

The pair, both of whom became teachers (he of mathematics), met in a small rural school. As the only male, Rufus became principal. He sparked Ruby; she responded. He proposed, she accepted on the condition that he take her away from all that. He took the Civil Service exam and applied for each opportunity that presented itself. Success took him to DC, where he would labor at his day job, keep books for the nascent Good Roads Association as a "side hustle," and eventually earn a Georgetown University law degree attending at night. Ruby would follow and wed the man her family thought "not good enough" to marry a Law. After a brief military stint in "the war to end all wars" and his family had grown to three children, Rufus headed home to Alabama to lead the new Internal Revenue Office outpost in Montgomery, responsible for all of the state outside Mobile.

Rubilaw walked with friends to school, where she applied herself particularly to studies of Elocution (Public Speaking) and absorbed a love of live theatre and music (she and a small group of friends coalesced as an informal group they called "The Jazz Seekers" and enjoyed live music in clubs from Montgomery to Fort Walton Beach, Florida as well as classical music). She attended the Baptist all-girls Judson College in Marion, Alabama before transferring to also Baptist co-ed Howard College in Birmingham, where she met Sam. They married when he got an unexpected weekend pass from transport duty and rode the train from New York City to Montgomery.

When they moved to the small south-Alabama county-seat town in 1948, the "city girl" seemed an odd fit for life as wife of the town's only Baptist church's pastor. Unlike many pastor's wives, Rubilaw's love of music did not extend to piano playing or choral singing. Her activity in the local (women's) Study Club produced social amelioration by creating the town's small public library; her club presidency during the time led to her promoting its founding and funding in multiple appearances before the city's governing body. For all its beneficial intent, her activity violated contemporaneous social norms of separation of church and state and women knowing their place and leaving governing to men.

Rubilaw made her mark as a preacher's wife by playing to her strengths and translating them into a religious setting. First among them was skill garnered as a debutante in what the religious would label "a gift of hospitality." Her broad intellectual curiosity interested her in people; her social training put her at ease in every social setting and instilled in her the art of conversation. She possessed skill at a "social Socratic method" that engaged even the socially awkward or inept, put each person at ease, and led them to disclosures to someone who seemed to care for nothing in the world so much as talking to and learning about them. The most mundane people found themselves not dismissed, but fascinating subjects engaged in conversation with a non-judgmental, understanding, and appreciative listener. She knew when and how to disengage graciously and naturally, leaving a conversant with a sense of appreciation, satisfaction, and completion. Most importantly, she could work her magic without props—though coffee or iced (usually sweet) tea and some kind of comestibles always made life easier for everyone. Perhaps most importantly, a careful observer would spot when she went into "hostess mode" but her hospitality rested not on an act, but on reality. She believed in loving people, eschewing judgment for empathy and understanding. She schooled herself to emulate her Master and worked hard to cultivate in herself the loving approach she saw modeled in His interaction with humans recorded in the New Testament. People never saw what went into that skill's development, only feeling instead enveloped, drawn out, and appreciated by its loving application.

As long as she remained a pastor's wife, Rubilaw worked with children in Vacation Bible School. Her husband's church employed a Pastor, a Music Minister, and a Church Secretary but no Education or Children's Minister, relying instead on volunteer Sunday School and Training Union Directors and Children's Department Leaders (invariably women). Rubilaw took denominational direction annually but gave it an attractive flair and then worked directly with the children to create a memorable experience. She seemed to approach it as one approached theatre, dressing sets and casting roles for everyone and, in the course of a week, helping them learn their lines for a "parents' night" finale. She learned or intuitively understood the truism "love me, love my children"—or perhaps, "love me by loving my children."

Southern Baptist leadership carefully divided adherents by gender in all educational settings. Year 'round, Rubilaw taught a women's Sunday School class, usually women her age and younger. In doing so, she called upon her own penchant for studying, her formal and self-directed education as a reader and life-long learner, and the resources available in her husband's library. She also took a leaf from his book in her student care. Sam had learned that it was incumbent on him to visit his congregation members regularly. To keep track of them he had a journal in which he inscribed the complete church roll by family: parent(s) and each child (if any) with birthdates. The black 1949 Ford or the blue 1955 one would park near the door, he would visit, and when he returned to the vehicle, before starting up, he would note the date and time and anything significant about the interaction (illness or concerns). So she too kept a journal of her class members, checking in by phone regularly and noting illness or concerns—praying with them by phone just as her husband prayed at the end of each of his visits. And prayer requests always marked the beginning of their times together.

Rubilaw loved to travel, commonly describing herself as part gypsy. The description's aptness lay not just in her interest in seeing new and interesting places, but in living (however briefly) a different culture, enjoying its food and music and art and literature. When their child turned ten, she initiated a series of long extended family trips around the United States. The blue Ford inaugurated an every-other-year summer trek in that two-lane, sixty mph era of unair-conditioned vehicles, mom-and-pop motor inns, and local rather than chain eateries. Five people—the nuclear family plus the matriarch's parents—would crowd into the sedan, men in the front and women and child in the back. The father always drove, the mother always navigated. They drove from dawn to dusk, ending the day in a motel at which the boy always hoped (usually in vain) to find a pool. The driver would limber up with a short game of pitch with his son.

Sundays always featured time in a local Baptist church, and stops offered views of Southern Baptist Home Mission Board undertakings as often as of usual tourist fare. Rubilaw's constant companions on these trips were her trusty and well-marked maps (some gas station maps, others AAA versions, and a few special commercial miniature atlases with tourist recommendations) her Argus C-3 loaded with Kodachrome slide film, and her store of knowledge about people and places carefully accumulated by voracious reading prior to departure. The trips served multiple purposes: family vacation that put family together and simultaneously got her pastor-husband away from the never-ending round of domestic crises that marked a local pastorate and kept the father away from home; seeing new places, eating new foods, meeting new people; and creating a record of mission work that she could use as visual aids as she taught women about missions.

This great undertaking combined some of Rubilaw's greatest strengths and dearest loves. Her love and flair for teaching women about missions would propel her into local and statewide WMU work, connections, and offices. Her interest in "foreign" lands, people, and cultures bred a contagion that drew women in to consider the mysteries of "the other" and God's love of "red and yellow, black and white" people around the world.

Rubilaw believed fervently that she and her husband were a ministry team, that everything she did would ultimately affect his ministry for good or ill. She drew upon her strengths and interests to make connections with the congregation just as he did. She even drafted her socialite skills into her ministry. The era retained a conviction that congregations should provide housing. Initially that housing consisted of a white frame house across the street from the "new" (early 1900s) domed and Tudor architecture church building and adjacent to the then-bedraggled wooden structure whose ground floor had housed the congregation and whose upper floor still contained the Masonic meeting place. By the mid-1950s, the congregation had constructed a brick parsonage some four blocks away that the family occupied.

Recognizing that they occupied the congregation's domicile, Rubilaw held an open house each Christmas as a way to welcome all to the home they had created and offer tacit admission that it was the congregation's house that the family occupied on sufferance. Knowing that some of the women felt perfectly free to visit all rooms and open closets and drawers to find out just what sort of housekeeper the preacher's wife might be, Rubilaw spent the month beforehand getting everything in perfect order. Her hostess skills allowed her to undertake such invasions of privacy with equanimity and even panache.

Evergreen lacked a hospital until the Hill-Burton Act (1946) made rural hospitals possible, and even then it took until 1954 to secure one in town. Until then—and even afterward—the couple visited parishioners who had been

hospitalized in Pensacola, Mobile, or Montgomery. Sometimes they made the trip alone but frequently with family who wanted or needed transportation. Some wives in that era lacked a license or practice in highway driving. Rubilaw's social experiences allowed her to practice her gift of hospitality with people in extreme circumstances. And her unwillingness to take herself seriously often lightened the atmosphere. Her diminutive size (five feet in high heels) and slight build often helped. When Sheriff James M. "Shorty" Brock wound up in Pensacola, for example, the Granade family took Shorty's wife Mildred down for a visit. When they stopped to eat, Sam suggested that he and Mildred act as husband and wife while Rubilaw would join her son as a child. Completely taken in by the ruse, the waitress cleared every "child's" order with the "parents"—especially when the "daughter" wanted coffee!

Rubilaw's intellectual curiosity never waned, though she always wore her learning lightly. She always saw it as a tool rather than an accomplishment, using it assiduously but almost surreptitiously to prepare without putting others off, or even making them ill-at-ease, in the process. If one paid attention, one realized the care that went into the preparation and its accuracy—but even then it was a slow recognition rather than a revelation. As church leadership came to recognize her gifts, particularly after their successful quarter-century's ministry in Evergreen ended, they sought to utilize those gifts rather than allow them to languish in disuse. Eventually the state convention would call on her to teach new pastor's wives how she had been so successful and offer, time-tested, and hard-won, understandings and strategies that they might employ to their benefit. At the heart of those conferences lay a simple reality: women in those roles needed to be themselves and play to their strengths rather than trying to fit some role that they thought the congregation expected or wished to see. In reminiscing about that ministry, Rubilaw's favorite story was of a new Alabama pastor who a short time after his wife had attended the new pastors' wives conference came up to her saying "Here's the woman who saved my marriage!" Taken aback, she asked what he meant. "You told her that it was OK for her to dye her hair any wild color and streak it if she wished," he replied. "She decided that if her heart's desire was approved like that, she could be a preacher's wife after all!"