

## The Extraordinary Life of Rev. Verne E. Coapman

*INTRODUCTION* — The following article was written by Esther Sharp Sanderson and was one of her 'Profiles in Courage' articles published in the *Scott County News* in the 1960s. This particular article was the first of a series entitled "Tall Men from the High Hills," and was first published on October 11, 1963.

Reverend Verne E. Coapman, former missionary to India and retired Minister of the Huntsville Presbyterian Church, has been chosen as my first subject in Profiles in Courage, "Tall Men from the High Hills". Reverend Coapman is an adopted hillbilly, but as much a part of the earthiness of the Cumberland Plateau as any native-born son. He is a Christian gentleman who has endeared himself to the people and Scott and adjoining counties. Out of the goodness of his heart he can always do and say the kindest things in the kindest way. His friends are numbered by his acquaintances.

In this short article, I can only scratch the surface on the life and works of Reverend Coapman. His life work, dedicated to the good of his fellow man, is strangely dramatic and fascinating. Filled with human emotions and exciting adventure, it would fill the pages of a full length book.

The Reverend Verne E Coapman was born and spent his youth on his father's farm near Portage, Wisconsin. This farm is not far from and similar to the rural circumstances in the current book *Rascal* by Sterling North. His parents were Fred J. and Edith (Ahrendt) Coapman. His name, Verne, was chosen from the French writer of adventure, Jules Verne, and the "E" was for his mother, who died when he was very young.

On June 7, 1920, he was united in marriage with Alice F. Lyon of Grand Rapids, Michigan. They have four children, all born in India. Edith Marie (Mrs. Donald E. Altar) of Arlington, Virginia, where her husband writes the Overseas A.I.D. Program for the State Department; Carol A. Bruce is in the insurance business in Maryville, Tennessee; John V.

Coapman is also with the State Department in Washington, D.C. On special occasions John V. equips and conducts big game hunts in India, Nepal, and Hunza. The September issue of *Field and Stream* carried a full length article concerning John's wonderful work and exciting adventures tiger



Figure 1 – The Verne E. Coapman family in a photo taken around 1940, soon after the family's arrival in Huntsville. Front row, from left: Verne E. Coapman, Paul and Alice F. Coapman. In back, from left: Carol, John, and Edith Marie.

hunting in India. Paul David, the youngest of the Coapman children, will leave this month for service in the U.S. Army.

Reverend Mr. Coapman's call to the ministry came while working towards his Masters Degree through the University of Wisconsin. Mr. Coapman's article in the *Christian Herald* describes "The Turning Point in My Life" as follows: "In 1916, I was working for a Masters Degree Thesis for the University of Wisconsin. While working on a prize farm, driving a manure spreader back over the rolling field to the barn, suddenly without any warning or previous thought, there appeared in the Southern sky from the horizon to the zenith a huge colorful image of the Christ. And his arm was raised with its index finger pointing heavenward. It was a startling experience. Was I called to leave the corn field and preach Christ?"

"I pondered over and wrestled over the experience for several weeks. Then on the evening of New Year, I told the proprietor of the Farm, James Baird, that I wanted to leave in the morning for McCormick Seminary in Chicago. He graciously gave his consent.

"There in Chicago, I completed my training for the Christian Ministry. It was there that I met my future wife, Alice F. Lyon, who was doing training for Christian Education in Chicago. Then on February 23, 1921 my wife's birthday, we left for India, sailing from New York harbor a few days later. As we slowly sailed out to sea on a large White Starliner, we passed the U.S. battleship *Tennessee*. Its band came on deck and struck up, "How Can I Leave Thee". This seemed a coincidence, since I had been serving in Tennessee during the summers. We passed the Statue of Liberty with her uplifted torch. It was a tender moment. How could we leave? But, we did!"

His first assignment was director of agricultural work in the Moga Training School for teachers. For his outstanding work over a period of thirty years as a missionary in India, he was listed in *The International Who's Who*.

Even before Mr. Coapman left For India, his life was filled with unusual experiences in this country. While in the University of Wisconsin, he was a member of the University Band and the Athence Debating Society. As a graduate student in Chicago, he did YMCA work at the Great Lakes Naval Training Camp. He taught a Sunday school class in the notorious section of Chicago known as "Little Hell". Summers of this period he did Sunday school work in Wyoming and Tennessee.

During the summer of 1917, in and around the old Fort Laramie Station, he rode horseback extensively in out-of-the-way places among cowboys and farmers, often spending nights in mangers and in underground houses. Rattlesnakes, antelopes and cougars were common experiences. In this stomping ground of Buffalo Bill, there was a war going on between the Dry Farmers and the Cowboys. Life was notoriously cheap. If a farmer dared to leave his shack, he might find it miles from his ranch. Loss of life was averted by Reverend Coapmans appealing nature and sense of humor and fair play.

He returned east and in the summer of 1918 and 1919 he spent in Tennessee where the perpetual war between the moonshiners and the Internal Revenue Agents was in progress. Any effort to

preach reform in the mountains at that time would have been futile. So Mr. Coapman promoted his Sunday school work by ingratiating himself with the moonshiners. With headquarters in Wartburg, Lancing and Gainsboro, he established a chain of Sunday Schools, one of which was headed by the leading moonshiner of the county.

The life of an embryo clergyman in the mountains where gun battles, family feuds, and neighborhood wars were just routine occurrences was a precarious one, but it didn't seem to hinder his work. Each of his Sunday Schools had a membership of from two to three hundred. One of the most enthusiastic teachers was the moonshine baron. The Coapman Sunday Schools, usually held in mountain school houses, became so very popular that one moonshiner offered to pay the ministers salary in exchange for a whiskey concession on the grounds where the services were offered. Many stories of killings and hair raising testimonies were heard at the revivals – genuine conversions.

On one occasion, Mr. Coapman was attempting to help an inebriated soldier, who was AWOL, to mount his mule. Being slightly dazed the soldier jumped on Mr. Coapman's half-hitched spirited horse and was off up the road with tugs and lines flying. Nearby lived a Campbellite preacher who beckoned Mr. Coapman to come in. The old preacher said, Come in and have a cup of strong coffee, well need it to catch that soldier." Then putting a big pistol into his pocket he bade Mr. Coapman follow him on another mule. Soon they came to some men sitting in the moonlight near a mailbox. Mr. Coapman heard one of the men say, "I caught him before he could wield his knife." Then a Justice of the Peace tried the soldier shotgun out there in the moonlight. Was there any charge or damage? "Hell no," said the Justice of the Peace. The next day the soldier escaped to the Kentucky border.

The Reverend Coapman again felt the call of the missionary. He returned to India where he continued his wonderful work. His successor, in a letter dated April 21, 1962, reported 16,000 Christians, fourteen organized churches, and thirteen village schools. The seed Rev. Coapman had sown was bearing fruit.

Perhaps one of his most outstanding experiences was in connection with the great Mahatma Gandhi when he heard him speak. Then, following his untimely death, the Coapmans witnessed his funeral and accompanied his ashes on the boat out to sea where the tides would scatter them on distant shores.

In India adventures deepened often in the mystical realm. Traveling by ox cart, Tongas, bicycles and T model Ford, he covered thousands of miles. He was attacked by robbers.

Once just in time, he saw a greased naked robber cutting his way into the tent he and his family occupied. Once they were met at the train by a man with an elephant sent by the Rajah. Snake charmers came to his door, and for a few coppers, put on a show of dancing cobras. Animals made hideous noises at night. The grave diggers, a civet cat, struck terror in the minds of the natives at night.

The Coapmans visited many holy places. They took off their shoes as they entered holy shrines, Nauhaua Sahit, birthplace of the Sikh, the Golden Temple of Amristrat and the Taj Mahal. They

visited the Towers of Silence in Bombay where the fat sleepy vultures were posed on the walls ready to pounce upon the first human body tube brought there. Bit by bit, they consumed the flesh from the bodies.

‘Terrible as this may sound,’ said Mr. Coapman. ‘But one forgets these common things in the midst of the wonderful hospitality and friendliness of the Indian people, that is equaled nowhere – unless here in Tennessee.’

On one of their return trips to the United States in 1942, their unarmed vessel came through the German submarine area. One surfaced near their vessel. Upon their return to New York, they learned that eight United States vessels had been sunk in the area. Said Mr. Coapman, God was good to us.”

After retiring as a missionary, Reverend Coapman served as pastor of the Huntsville and Helenwood Presbyterian churches and the Wartburg and Lancing churches. He retired from the ministry in 1956.

He and Mrs. Coapman reside in their little home by the side of the road near Huntsville. They are friends to all who pass and call. Besides writing for publications, lectures, and church work, he and Mrs. Coapman keep busy and happy raising and eating bountiful Tennessee vegetables and fruit.

To sum up Mr. Coapman’s career, he says he’d like to write a book. But if he did so, says he, “No one would believe my unusual escapades and episodes.”

Above all Mr. Coapman believes that the only hope in the world is obedience to Christ’s command in Matthew 28:19:20 to carry the gospel to all nations. As a recent writer put it, “Why do you go as a missionary to Nepal?” His reply was, “Why are you not going?”

“I know not where his islands lift Their froned palms in air; I only know I cannot drift Beyond his love and care.”

***EDITOR’S NOTE** – Paul David Coapman, son of Verne and Alice Coapman, lives in Clinton, Tennessee. In a phone conversation September 19, 1997, Pauly brought me up to date on the family.*

*Pauly and his wife have eight children. He had to take early retirement (with 31 years of service) from the Tennessee Department of Human Services due to complications he is experiencing with multiple sclerosis.*

*His sister, Carol Ann Lowe, who lived in Maryville, died in 1982.*

*Another sister, Edith Marie Alter, known as Cleo, is in Winwood Nursing home in Clinton, Tennessee suffering from Alzheimer’s disease.*

*John Vernon Coapman, Pauly’s brother was last known to be in Turkey.*

*Alice Coapman, wife of Verne and mother to the above four children, died in 1992 after a brief stay in Winwood Nursing Home in Clinton. She is buried in Anderson County.*