

# Ethel

*A Pioneer Preacher*



By David S. Norris

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# 1

## A Charmed Life

Alphaeus Boyd and Lucy Morey did not marry young. In fact, on the day of their wedding he was thirty-two and Lucy was thirty. Though they hailed from Ontario, Canada, it was in rural New York State where these two fell in love and wed, only four years after the American Civil War. All things considered, it was a very good marriage. Alphaeus and Lucy possessed the same strong values. Each was self-reliant and hard-working, and though neither was overly religious, both revered God in significant ways. Theirs was a worldview that suited them for the farm life they chose. Further, since farming requires a lot of hands working together, it is not surprising that Alphaeus and Lucy began having children right away.

If the story of the Boyd family had ended in New York, this biography would be entirely different. Importantly, New York State was merely the setting for the introductory chapter in the marriage of Alphaeus and Lucy Boyd. Their real adventure began in earnest when Alphaeus uprooted his family and trekked halfway across the continent. Whether Alphaeus had

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“the pioneer gene” or simply saw a good opportunity when it presented itself, what we do know is this: after fourteen years of marriage, the Boyds pulled up stakes and headed for the Wild West. It was 1883, only seven years after Custer’s last stand, that Alphaeus Boyd laid claim to a large tract of land in the Dakota Territory.

The Boyds had most certainly *not* settled on the fruited plains; this was virgin prairie land, acreage that Alphaeus and his boys cleared in hopes of a harvest. It required long spring days as father and sons turned the soil with their plow. They sowed and hoed and prayed in anticipation of a full yield from their fields of barley and oats. In years when the weather cooperated, the Boyds did well. When the rains faltered, they made do and held on. Overall, they enjoyed more good years than bad years, collecting their surplus in silos and depositing those few extra dollars in the bank. Further, because Alphaeus had a gift with animals, over time he established himself as a veterinarian. This was no small feat in late nineteenth century prairie land, given that pioneers knew little of the profession and were innately suspicious of anyone taking on the fancy title of veterinarian. Yet, because Alphaeus was dependable and good at what he did, he came to earn the trust of all who knew him.

All told, Alphaeus and Lucy Boyd had seven sons and three daughters. The last of the ten was a surprise, born a number of years after her older siblings. Her parents named her Ethel Mae Boyd. When she was born, Alphaeus was fifty-one and Lucy was forty-nine, the median age at which people died in North Dakota

at the turn of the twentieth century. Ethel was born on April 7, 1898. While her older siblings had earlier fought for the attention of their parents, by this time Ethel had no one with whom to compete, and she was the center of attention. Her mother loved her dearly, and her father doted on her, for Ethel was the apple of his eye.

Religiously, Alphaeus and Lucy hailed from two different church backgrounds. He was raised Episcopal; Lucy was a good Methodist. Episcopal or not, Alphaeus never went to church. He often explained, "You do not have to attend church to worship God but can do so on a hillside or under a tree just as Christ did." It is questionable whether such a statement may be found anywhere in the pages of Scripture. What is unquestionable is that such a laissez-faire approach to religion inspires few followers. Because Lucy's faith was more certain—Lucy was Methodist and proud of it—the whole family (apart from Alphaeus) was decidedly Methodist as well.

Sunday school was not optional for any of the children. Of course, this didn't mean Lucy went herself. "Why don't you come too?" three-year-old Ethel asked her mother.

"Well, honey," Lucy replied, "you know I just can't hear that well, so it is hard for me to get too involved." Ethel smiled and nodded, swaying back and forth in her pretty little white dress, content to hold her pink parasol in one hand and her offering in the other. "Now don't lose that penny!" her mother warned. "It's for the offering!"

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Though pioneers typically shared in a common economic struggle, the Boyds did well compared to others. It was not merely hard work on the farm that made the difference; Alphaeus Boyd's success as a veterinarian was key to their relative affluence. In fact, once his practice took off, Alphaeus moved his family to Park River, North Dakota, where he devoted himself to it full time.

When Ethel started school at age five, most of her older siblings were gone from home. By the time she was ten, they all were. Some had gotten married while others had simply pursued other interests. They all had absorbed the self-reliance of their parents and were pioneering their own futures. Because most were scattered hundreds of miles away in towns and on farms, Ethel's siblings seemed to her like distant aunts and uncles. For Lucy and Alphaeus, the house that had once been such a hustle and bustle now seemed a bit lonely. This was all the more reason why Doctor Alphaeus Boyd loved having his little girl with him. She was virtually an only child and, given his age, people would inevitably ask, "Is that your granddaughter?" He wasn't offended; he was proud.

Everybody loved Doc Boyd, but not just because he was good with their animals. He had a wonderful personality and was at the center of every social gathering he attended. Further, he and Lucy loved to entertain. If someone put on a social, Alphaeus often dressed up for the occasion and cut quite an impressive figure in his stiff bosom-shirt, celluloid collar, and frock coat. But it was not merely his attire that was so compelling.

The truth is that nobody could tell stories like Doc Boyd. He knew all about the Wild West because he had lived in it. He often told of his early adventures as a stagecoach driver through the badlands of the Dakota Territory. His route took Alphaeus from Bismarck to Fort Laramie and Cheyenne, winding its way through the Black Hills. He had seen the aftereffects of several Indian massacres that others had only read about. A burned wagon train with all the settlers slain was not a pretty sight. But he had seen it and could tell about it in all its gory details. According to Alphaeus, the Indians never bothered his stage run because he paid for his safety with whiskey.

Not just a storyteller, Doc was a singer as well. He had a beautiful voice. Lucy would begin on the old pump organ, and he would break out with his clear baritone voice, offering his own rendition of any number of popular songs. Further, because little Ethel had inherited his singing voice and because she was so cute, Alphaeus always tried to feature her singing a solo. He wasn't always successful, though. At times, Ethel showed no desire to stand in front of a group of people. However, her dad succeeded by sweetening the invitation; on more than one occasion, he promised her a quarter for her efforts. Those who knew of the payment were aghast at such an excessive bribe, for two bits could purchase a goodly quantity of food and clothing. For Doc, such criticism fell on deaf ears. Nothing was too good for his baby.

Not only did Ethel love her parents dearly; from the earliest time, she also wanted to please God, and

she was sensitive to His voice. More than her siblings or her parents, her heart was bent heavenward. So it was that Ethel surprised her parents one day with a special request. Since several of Ethel's friends were Episcopal, Ethel herself had taken to going regularly to their church. Swayed by what she deemed to be their deeper type of worship, Ethel decided that a change in her life was in order. One day she announced, "So I've decided."

"Decided what?" asked her father.

"Well, you know that I have been going every Sunday to the Episcopal church. I have decided to join that church, so long as it is all right with you and Mom."

Ethel's proud Methodist mother was shocked but said nothing. Her father's lip curled in an amused smile, but when he saw how serious his little girl was, he sobered up and acknowledged, "All right, that seems like a mighty fine choice."

As Ethel studied to learn the catechism, Alphaeus rounded up sponsors. In that church, it was important to have godparents, those who pledged to serve as spiritual guides to the one being baptized. Since he knew everyone, and since many of the leaders of the community attended there, it wasn't difficult for Alphaeus to find suitable sponsors. Mr. Lord, president of one of the banks in town, agreed to serve as Ethel's godfather, and Mrs. Walstrom, the wife of a department store owner, would serve as her godmother. Thus, with everything in order, Ethel was baptized into the Episcopal church. Because she had learned the catechism, she also was qualified



to become a member of the choir, enjoying both the practices and singing in church. In due time, Ethel won her first Bible.

Though Ethel seemed to have the perfect childhood, her idyllic world would not last. A single event changed everything. Twelve-year-old Ethel was on her way home from a friend's house when she heard a man from town calling to another, "Did you hear Doctor Boyd died today?" Ethel turned to hear what they were saying, but when the two men saw her, they began to speak in hushed whispers. She was stunned and began running from town to their home, never stopping to rest. If something had happened to her father, her mother simply must know.

An unknown black car in front of her house gave Ethel pause. Walking toward the screen door, Ethel recognized its owner, Doc Wah. The good doctor was leaving in a rush. He called back over to Ethel's mother, "So I will call back this evening. If there is anything we can do . . ."

Lucy stood holding the screen door open, eyes unfocused and empty, tears streaming down her cheeks. Ethel ran to her mother, but before she could say a word, Lucy pulled her into a tight embrace, mourning, "I'm so sorry; I am so sorry."

"What happened?" asked Ethel, trying to catch her breath.

"Dad was giving shots to some calves and checking up on the horses at the Lindstrom farm. Honey, he had a heart attack."

"A heart attack?" Ethel asked.

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“Doc Wah just got back from there. He would have been here sooner, but it’s eighteen miles of winding country roads. Your father didn’t make it. The doctor just told me.”

That day Ethel’s childhood ended. The innocence of the world was replaced with something else, something she couldn’t quite identify. Alphaeus was sixty-three when he died. When they read his obituary, they said he left behind a loving wife and ten children. What the obituary didn’t mention was that there was very little a sixty-one-year-old widow could do to support her twelve-year-old daughter. Though Alphaeus and Lucy felt affluent compared to others, in truth, they had little reserves.

All of the Boyd children came home for the funeral at the Episcopal church. Reverend Curry officiated. Afterward, people said the ceremony was beautiful and that they had never seen such a well-attended funeral, a testament to how many people loved Alphaeus. That was some small consolation for Lucy. And though Lucy felt blessed to have all of her children home (it had been years since they were all together), the strength she drew from them lasted for exactly two days before first one and then another and then the rest returned to their own lives. Lucy was left alone with her grief and her twelve-year-old daughter.

In truth, Lucy Boyd had little time to reflect. Though there had been enough money for a nice funeral, she knew that with no money coming in, things would get tight. In true pioneer fashion she simply did what had to be done next. She passed the

word that the house was for sale and soon disposed of it. Then she sold everything that wasn't nailed down. It was hard to sell a lifetime of memories, but she did so readily, hawking all she had accumulated through the years at bargain prices.