

# **Robert Joseph Lyons Memorial**

**October 19, 2018**

**Central Baptist Church**

**Sioux Falls, South Dakota**

**[Died age 97 - September 10, 2018]**

**By Jay Beaman (son-in-law, husband of Rockie Lyons Beaman)**

On Aug. 13, 1921, Bob Lyons was born, on the farm, some distance from KeyaPaha, Tripp County, South Dakota, basically a road crossing with a post office and general store, named after the nearby Keya Paha River. Keya Paha, a Sioux Indian word meaning “turtle hills,” or “turtle butte.” Whether it was named for the shape of a particular hill or more likely of the literal turtles in the watering holes, the D.B. Lyons family would learn that you can actually survive on turtle soup if need be, living through one of the greatest ecological disasters in history, the dust bowl and the great depression of the 1930s. The 1920 census records just 29 souls in Beaver Township, Tripp County, South Dakota, and among the 29, 6 of Dennis B. Lyons and Beatrice Peshak Lyons and their four children, James, William, Angela, and Margaret. The following year, Bob Lyons was born. Dick would be born 4 years later, and Kathryn in the 1930s; seven children in all. D.B. Lyons had brought his exotic wife to the ranch, the only Bohemian in the Beaver Creek area, before even that wide spot in the road, KeyaPaha, had been so named. The first access had been a military trail, used to move Native Americans from Fort Laramie, Wyoming, to Yankton, South Dakota, and later from Yankton to the Rosebud Reservation. Sitting Bull was born on the trail in 1831. Now, in successive land expropriations, the U.S. government was making room for further development of the Great Plains by waves of European migrants. In the shadow of Pine Ridge, D.B. purchased a recently established homestead, with a living spring on the northern edge of the Ogallala aquifer, that watered the Midwest from Texas to South-Dakota. The Missouri River drained a land that veered every year between Ice Age and global warming, with abundant wild life, and living memory of massive herds of bison.

Arriving by train and horse wagon, these families settled quarter-mile sections, with dreams of horse ranches, when the horse was both a vital transport and a major mode of production. Before D.B. and Bess had finished ranching, the Midwest would become a wheat-based economy, producing major wealth, development and almost immediate boom and bust economies, leaving economic and social devastation, and much chastened social mores in their wake. Their family experienced momentary success, followed by devastating economic, and ecological disaster, near starvation, and a re-emptying of the countryside. When World War One

came, D.B. had successfully claimed farm and family exemption and immediately set up farming. When WWII came to his kids at almost the precise same stage of life as WWI had come to him, three sons and a daughter, leapt at the chance to join up and serve their country elsewhere. The alternative of staying on the ranch was literally not available. One son, William, died in France after the Omaha invasion, of pneumonia. The oldest son, Jim, stayed in the military. Angela, herself a military nurse, married a career serviceman in the San Francisco Bay area. When Bob returned from the Navy, after a brief stay on Okinawa, to the ranch at KeyaPaha, his father, broken and bitter from living his dream with only the youngest son, Dick, and his wife remaining, couldn't even bring himself out of the field to greet his son, newly returned from the war. It was a deep wound for Bob, reinforcing the harshness of the culture actually accomplished by those first to develop the plains.

It was clear to him that he would need to find his way in the city. Just before the war, he had worked in a dairy and paid his way through college as a teacher. When it was clear he could teach but not make a living, the social magnet that was Sioux Falls pulled him in. He initially tried unsuccessfully to get a job at Morrell's meat packing plant, and then into the steam pipe insulator's work, and tried his hand selling rainbow vacuum cleaners, only to settle on working in the Nickel Plate restaurant, after working four days without pay to prove his worth. The great depression and war had fueled his life's mission to find paying work, and one day he sat down in a small burger joint wondering if he would ever succeed. The owner sat down with him and spun a tale of a great entrepreneurial future, and shortly thereafter Bob discovered his life's work, and much of its meaning. For his young bride, similarly saved from the remotest prairies and forests of the Peace River in Canada, by the wiles of Sioux Falls, his dream of being a business owner in the big city, defined her to the point of memorializing her as a waitress on the still iconic sign at Bob's Café. Being Midwesterners defined all three of Bob and Ima's children as workers, and work as central to their identity. For my wife, Rockie, it remains perhaps the main pillar to her identity, and success as an adult, that like her father, she will show herself to be an ideal citizen by being first and foremost, a skilled and devoted worker. Her father's dream of being an entrepreneur, with its nightmare of endless hours of work at the Café, became both means and end, the goal becomes the journey. She would later say, her father gave her almost complete freedom growing up as long as she was at the café at 6:00 am on Saturday and Sunday to open and run the store by herself as a teenager. Our son, Bob's grandson, was so short when he started waiting the counter at the café, that he would hold the coffee pot over his head and pour coffee over his own height, saying to the customer, "tell me when it's full." That is iconic as well.

But, life beyond the ranch in the big city and success, was still dangerous and survival was not assured. Bob and Ima experienced tragedy with the loss of their youngest child, Rhonda, as a young adult living in Sacramento in 1982; the victim of a mass shooting. Our country is still struggling with how to create community in the face of widespread, seemingly random violence. As part of a family who has survived, and witnessing Bob, these 36 years later

from his daughter's murder, there is no magic pill that gives it any meaning. Not even time. Violence is just that, violence, and nothing more.

Bob outlived all of his siblings, and has been able to see more of the family generations as they grow up. He has been blessed to live independently into his 90s and drive his chicken wagon long beyond anything reasonable. Even after stopping driving and moving to Good Sam's retirement home, he has had his independent apartment, and was able to entertain a regular coterie of visitors over these last years. Just as his kids lived-out his dream of owning a café, with their own sweat, they are also left to close out and sell the café here after he has died.

Bob's religious life was first Catholic, then Pentecostal, and then Baptist. When D.B. and Bess Lyons moved to the ranch, outside KayaPaha, there was no church. D.B. Lyons got a Jesuit priest from St. Francis church, named Father Sialm to perform the first mass at his home in the summer of 1916. In the Fall of 1920 and winter of 1921, St. Ann's Catholic church was built on the D.B. Lyons ranch. It was served by Father Eardly and later Father Quilligan. June 24, 1930, on the same day that Marie Storms and James Welsh had been married at St. Ann's Church, there was a tornado. St. Ann's church was destroyed by that tornado. It was later reported that D.B. Lyons was hit in the head by the church and survived. Many others could relate to the experience. Other families in St. Ann's, were the Storms, Welshes, Sharkeys, Kinneys, Volmers, Roberts, Seilers, and Gliddens.

When Bob moved to Sioux Falls, and married Ima Ristesund, she was already a part of the Church of the Bible, and had attended the Bible School there, founded by Rev. William Dirks. They, along with their three children became a part of the Church of the Bible, and later the Pentecostal version of Faith Temple in Sioux Falls. Bob and Ima were among the leaders in that church for years. After semi-retirement, Bob and Ima became a part of Central Baptist church, when a number of Faith Temple members migrated over there. While Bob and Ima were at Faith Temple, and later at Central Baptist, a modest portion of their customers were from those churches, and some would hold forth on this or that subject over coffee, breakfast, and lunch. By dinner time and late into the night, a much saltier clientele occupied the same seats at the café.

I lived with Bob and Ima while attending Seminary at the Baptist Seminary in Sioux Falls from 1980-1982, along with Rockie and our three children. Bob and Ima put up with a lot, while helping us with our housing and kids during those years, and we all became quite close. If you lived with Bob, you worked at the café sometimes. I know from personally climbing up in the attic and working on the heating ducts, and from holding rags and hoses in the sewer line, and from mopping the floors, and peeling potatoes and serving customers and cooking on the grill, some intimate details of café life. I knew more than a few customers, the church crowd in the morning, and the evening crowd from Morrell workers to Augustana Students, some who came to eat after the bars closed at 2:00 am. I remember the old guy sitting next to his date quite late at night, who accused me of shortchanging him and who was yelling, "I have a witness." He was pointing to his old girlfriend, face down in her plate of food. In another case, Bob was cleaning

up after a customer and noticed the old drunk guy had dropped a \$20 bill on the floor. Bob kept the \$20, and every time the guy came back in for weeks he gave him dinner for free, “on the house.” The guy said he really liked Bob. Bob said, these guys come in here and hope you take care of them, even if they are drunk. They hope you won’t take advantage of them. But, he could also be no-nonsense.

One time all the 12 counter stools were filled with customers quite late after an Augustana football game, must have been a Friday night. Behind every stool was another customer waiting for that stool to empty so they could eat. People in the back would shout their orders forward in hopes their food would be ready when a stool opened up. They might wait a while, but it was worth it. In the front door came a student or recent graduate. There must have been 30 people in that little room including workers, but Bob spotted this guy come in the door and yelled at him, “You, leave!” I thought it was mean, and it was serious. Later, we sometimes called Bob the “chicken Nazi,” after the soup Nazi from the Seinfeld show. The young man argued with Bob, “Aw Bob let me stay and eat.” Bob replied, “You have three more weeks before you can come back.” Turns out he was on probation from Bob’s Café and it was making a serious dent in his social life.

And, don’t give Bob a bad check at the café. He would keep them. When a customer gave Bob a check, he would look them over, stare at them, and require several pieces of ID. And, he got his share of bad checks. One guy wrote Bob a bad check for a large order of chicken and ribs. When it bounced, Bob held on to it for a long time. One time Bob needed an old car front seat re-upholstered. So, he knew this guy was an upholsterer. Bob called him up and got him to fix his car’s upholstery. The job was done, and Bob picked up the car and got ready to pay the agreed upon price. But, instead of writing a check, Bob handed him the bad check that the upholsterer had written him long before as payment. Midwestern justice. The upholsterer did not like it but it was fair.

And, Bob looked at my working at the café as a way of learning his notions of religion, fair play, and social order. He saw my working at the café as a sort of internship to become a minister. One night a guy came into the café and ate late dinner and got to talking with me and found out I was a ministerial student. Assuming I was following Jesus, the poor preacher and wanting to take care of myself too, he challenged me to walk out of the café, give up my job, my security, and just follow Jesus on faith. He claimed I wanted to be rich and famous like Billy Graham. The guy was drunk and belligerent. He came behind the counter and got in my face and started banging on my chest, “Walk right out of here!” he yelled. I was intimidated and wondered if my fancy counseling training and skills were going to help this guy or just hurt me. Finally the guy left. Bob chided me. “What do you think you accomplish by talking to a drunk like you can help him? You can’t help him, you don’t even understand him. Next week that guy won’t even remember being in here, or meeting you.” I disagreed. Months later, the same guy came back and had a late dinner. He was quiet during dinner, so I thought maybe he had forgotten. Bob looked at me. The guy finished his food, and then sort of smirked at me. “So,

what'll it be? You going to walk out of here? You a big chicken? Do you have faith?" And then he started yelling at me, "Walk right out of here right now!" Finally, the guy left and the other customers just looked at me and wondered what I did to set that guy off. Bob came over and chuckled, "so did you help that guy?"

But, I did feel that Bob could be too harsh, that he might learn something from my training in counseling and human relations. Over time, he started closing the café earlier in the night, so he could go home and sleep some. Closing time became midnight. Not all customers understood the reasons for this change. One night a couple of young guys drove up after we had turned out the open sign and turned the lights out in the parking lot. They walked up to the locked front door and tried to get in. Then they spotted us in the back window and came over to that door and knocked. Bob yelled at them through the window, "We're closed." They seemed so dejected and begged through the window for some chicken and ribs to take home. I looked at Bob, and he said don't answer the door. I made an executive decision and opened the door, and in the kindest way I knew how I told them we are closed, that it was too late and we were just cleaning up to go home. They cursed me, flipped me off, and went over to the window and dropped their drawers to the window and mooned me. Bob didn't say much, but chuckled as he said, "I guess you knew better." I didn't say much either, but it made me laugh. As far as internships go, that stuff you don't learn in the books.

I am actually grateful to Bob and Ima, for raising Rockie, with her dangerously strong work ethic. I am thankful to them for letting us live with them while I attended and graduated from Seminary, for encouraging our kids as they were growing up, for being really decent grandparents. Our children all worked at the café and learned enough common sense to get jobs later on. One of our grandchildren is named Dakota. In this politically charged climate, this left-coast family has been changed by our sojourn in Dakota. Those Irish and more East European folks who settled the plains created a kind of life that one had to see to believe. The life here was defined by stark demarcation between the seasons. It is perhaps emblematic that Bob is in the ground here in Dakota that land that defined him, at the end of Fall. Nearly a hundred years are past. A lot has changed. We shall see what remains.