

Jamie Buckingham

How can an ordinary fellow—say, the owner of a small grocery store in a Tennessee mountain village—carry out Jesus' command to “go ye into all the world and preach the Gospel”?

That's the question which kept bugging Bob Donaldson—an ordinary fellow. Bob owns and operates, with his wife and mother-in-law, a small grocery store in Erwin, Tennessee—population 5,000 and holding. But it's unlike any grocery store you've ever seen. And there's no way Bob Donaldson can be described as a typical grocer.

Bob's really an aviator who, for the time being, is selling groceries. When he was fifteen he got a paper route so he could earn enough money to fly the old Steerman at his home town airport. Then he flew jets in the Navy, after which he had a good job as the pilot for a large corporation. But when the corporation sold its plane, leaving Bob with more than 6,000 hours of logged flying time and no job, he decided to fold his wings and settle down.

That's when he bought Smith's Market in Erwin.

Located between two liquor stores, the market, with its wooden floor and bins of produce, doesn't even have a sign in front to identify it. Everyone in Erwin just seems to call it “the grocery store.” Bob held fast for nearly five years, but now he's making money. The store still has the flavor of a general store with a cracker barrel and a place for the village folks to stand around and “chew the fat.” And would you believe that he's still making home deliveries while his mother-in-law handles the duties.

“Folks like to be able to call in and order five pounds of potatoes or two loaves of bread and have it delivered to their house,” he said.

Not only that, but I know, from having eaten dinner with him, that Bob sells the finest steaks east of Texas at prices even the Texans would have a hard time matching.

“Some months we break even, and some months we make a little money,” Bob told me. “But God always brings us through.”

It was God who kept nudging Bob that he had more for him than merely



JAARS pilot Bob Griffin, Bob Donaldson and Logos Journal editor Jamie Buckingham pose behind “the jar” with the radio for Guatemala.



Hands were laid on the radio and it was sent out.

Grocery Store Goes to the Mission Field



“The jar”

sorting lettuce and squeezing the Charmin. Bob had always been a nominal Christian. A churchgoer. But a spiritual revolution was brewing in his heart. Bob had, in his own words, been “filled with the Holy Spirit.” Instead of being an ordinary grocer, he became a man like Jeremiah—with a fire in his bones to witness for the Lord.

A Holy Spirit Experience

In February of 1974, Bob, his wife Annelle, and several others from Erwin traveled with 4,000 other Spirit-filled believers to the First World Conference on the Holy Spirit in Jerusalem. The conference was sponsored by Logos International and for the first time Bob was exposed to the free flow of the Spirit in a large crowd of people. He returned to Erwin so excited his wife had to constantly remind him to “tend the store.”

Bob and Annelle put up a huge book rack in their grocery store, selling Logos books and other Christian titles—alongside the chewing tobacco and canned tomato sauce. In fact, Bob's pastor, Earle Barron of the Erwin Presbyterian Church, admits that Bob was doing as much preaching as he—only he was doing it over the meat counter rather than a pulpit. The Holy Spirit had invaded his heart.

When Bob got the news of a big teaching conference at Montreat, North Carolina, he rounded up a gang of folks from Erwin and they drove down. It was at that conference Logos International introduced my book, *Into the Glory*, the story of the Jungle Aviation and Radio Service (JAARS)—the jungle pilots who fly for the Wycliffe Bible Translators.

Well, Bob almost went into orbit. At last he had found a Christian book about flying—and about missions. I autographed a copy and he took it back to Erwin with him. He read it through in one sitting. Then he read it again. Then he got in his car and drove down to Waxhaw, N.C. to the JAARS headquarters. Inwardly, he told me later, he was hoping that executive director Bernie May would “sign him up” as a jungle pilot. He was ready to sell the store and move his family to Bolivia, or Africa—just so he would fly for Jesus.

But there was no offer. Confused, and a little disappointed, Bob returned

please turn page

to Erwin and began to pray. It was at that time he started getting serious about that big question, "Lord, how can I fulfill the great commission?"

The answer didn't come in the form of a divine skywriter with trailing smoke leaving inspired commands in the heavens. Instead, it came in a still small voice, "Serve me where you are."

So Bob got a big five gallon pickle jar, filled it with water, and put it on the checkout counter beside the cash register. Then he began encouraging his customers to make donations—to drop their change into the jar and watch it sink to the bottom. The only



Happiness is giving to missions.

problem was no one had ever heard of JAARS, much less been to a mission field.

But Bob's enthusiasm for JAARS was infectious. Soon his customers were willingly throwing their change into his "Jar for JAARS." At the end of the first month Bob sent JAARS a check for \$33.62. The second month the amount had almost doubled. By the third month most of the town of Erwin, indeed the entire county, had heard of JAARS. Bob was not only passing out literature, but had obtained a copy of the new JAARS film and was out almost every night—showing it in churches, home prayer groups and civic clubs.

Setting A Goal

In the fall of 1975 Bob was instrumental in getting Bernie May to come to Erwin to speak at the military banquet for the Junior ROTC of the high school. While he was there, Bernie made a suggestion to Bob.


"Why don't you give your customers a target to shoot for? Stan and Margot McMillen are Wycliffe translators, isolated far from civilization in Las Pacayas, Guatemala. They desperately need a radio since they are three hours from their nearest contact with

the outside world. Why not ask your customers to buy that radio—through the jar?"

Erwin was going through an economic depression. Unemployment was at twenty-five percent. Even the casket factory across from the grocery store was closed down. The single side band radio with a range of 1200 miles would cost \$686—a lot of money for poor mountain folks to raise. But Bob caught the challenge on the run and never looked back.

And that's the reason I showed up in Erwin, Tennessee, one Tuesday af-

ternoon last spring. Bob Griffin, JAARS representative and jungle pilot, picked me up in Atlanta and we flew up to dedicate the radio. It was quite an occasion. Donaldson had announced it for weeks and it seemed like half the countryside turned out. They crowded into the little grocery store, eager to see a real live missionary pilot—Griffin, and a real live bookwriter—me. But mostly they were there because their hearts had been enlarged through the witness of an ordinary fellow, Bob Donaldson, who had challenged them to lift up



They say Americans are becoming indifferent to pain

*We've seen too much, too long and too often—
On the tube,
And in the morning paper.
We glance away.*

*Too many bodies in the jungle.
Too many riots at home
And refugees across the world.
Epidemics
Revolutions
Rags and tin basins.*

*Too many appeals like this one. Kids suffering.
It's too bad and turn the page.
Who can help them all?
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But nobody's stopping you from
Helping one.*

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Letting yourself care?
It'll do you more good than you know.*

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their eyes and look on the fields white unto harvest.

Annelle was a little tearful. After all, she was as deeply involved as Bob. So was her mother, Rose Richardson. In fact, I even noticed tears in the eyes of Fred Huskins, Bob's helper in the store. And the bread salesman. And Bob's pastor. In fact, a whole lot of people cried that afternoon.

Of course, Bob was too excited to cry. All he could think about was a community, his community, who cared enough about an unknown translation team in the jungles of Central

America, to send them a shortwave lifeline with civilization.

Even I did some crying. I was fascinated by the little children who stood on boxes and watched their nickels and dimes floating down to join the rest of the money in the jar—a jar almost three fourths filled, not to mention the checks and bills which Bob had stashed under the counter.

The Widow's Mite

Then there was Virginia Riddle. This rugged mountain woman with a crippled leg and twisted arm seemed to portray, somehow, the spirit of

everyone who had helped with the project. Badly crippled by the polio which had struck her years ago, she was living on a \$154.65 a month pension. Day after day she walked the mountain roads and trails, picking up discarded pop bottles. She would bring these to Bob Donaldson for a refund on the deposit, part of which she would then donate to "the jar." That afternoon I watched as she hobbled up to the jar, painstakingly unknotted her old handkerchief, and prayerfully dropped her two nickels into the jar. And for a moment, I thought I caught a glimpse of Jesus, standing over behind the bread counter, watching—and blessing.



Last minute contributions

After a few speeches, we all gathered around the little radio and laid hands on it. Bob Griffin prayed a dedication prayer and the good people of Erwin, Tennessee, sent the radio out to the mission field.

The people lingered in the store far past the usual closing time that evening, chatting, hugging one another and feeling good about what they had done. I felt good, too, for I had seen how one man, how a grocery store, how an entire community, could stay home—and go, too.

Yet I suspected, as we left, that the story was not yet ended. The last sound I heard as we walked through the door out into the crisp night air, was Bob's cash register ringing up the final sale of the day—and the clink of coins, dropping into the now empty jar. Who knows, maybe this time the people of Erwin will level an airstrip in the Philippines, build a hangar in Indonesia, or buy an airplane for Colombia. But I suspect their contribution will be far more than that. I suspect they will wind up sending one of their own as Christ's ambassador overseas. For that's what usually happens, you know, when people get serious about missions.

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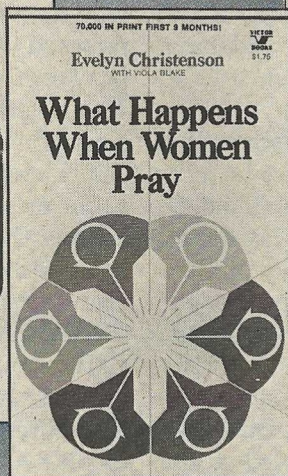
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