



Barefoot in Church *by Gary Adams, Santa Barbara, California*

IN FIFTH GRADE I WORE HIGH-TOP brogans [a heavy laced usually ankle-high work boot] to a two-room schoolhouse in the foothills of the High Sierra [California, U.S.A.]. My father worked on a dam-construction project and was gone during the week. As the eldest boy, I got up at 5 AM and milked the cow before school.

The brogans were my only shoes, and I didn't always clean them well enough after the morning chores. When some of the other students complained about the odor of manure on them, my mother decided to purchase a pair of rubber boots that I would wear for my barnyard chores. Meanwhile the brogans were just about worn out, and there was not enough money for rubber boots *and* school shoes. In the spring I began to go to school barefoot.

One day a local married couple came to visit us on our farm and said they had heard I was going to school without shoes. They wanted to take me to church in the city, twenty miles away, and get me a pair of shoes. I submitted only after my older, sister, who was eleven, agreed to come along.

When the couple arrived on Sunday morning, I was disappointed that they hadn't brought the shoes with them. They said I would get them when we got to church.

After we arrived at the church, I asked again about the shoes, because I thought it was a law that you had to wear shoes to church—especially a big, fancy one like this. The little church in our town was sparsely furnished with benches and a simple cross on the wall. The city church was decorated with huge curtains, stained glass, and gold statues. But the couple brought me inside barefoot.

After a half-hour of preaching and singing, the church had a sharing session, and the couple brought us before the congregation. The husband told everyone that I had been going to school barefoot and suggested taking up a collection for me. He pushed me out into the aisle, where I stood, shoeless, feeling ashamed, and fighting hard not to cry.

On the ride home I hid my face, and my sister put her hand on my head and just left it there the whole way back.

The couple returned to the farm only once. When I saw their car coming up the road next to the orange grove, I ran to the river and hid out until they had left. Later I went into the house, and in the middle of the kitchen table was a cheap pair of canvas sneakers, two sizes too large.