

# Preface

Pioneer. Visionary. Rebel. Leader. Churchman. Jim Rayburn was all of those things. He was also a mountain climber, daredevil, world traveller, raconteur, and considered by many to be the best communicator of the gospel of the twentieth century. Sought out by governors, industrialists, and academics alike, he also counted the leading Christians of his day as his friends. But Jim Rayburn's favorite people to spend time with were high school students. "By far and away the greatest job in the world today," he said, "is just to thumb the pages of this New Testament, which was written to make Jesus Christ known, and to do it in the presence of a group of people who are listening, who know you care about them, and no beans about it; people that you've taken the time and the trouble to prove to that you really care." Fitting for the man who founded and led Young Life for the first twenty-four years of its existence.

The liberals called him too fundamental; meanwhile the fundamentalists found him entirely too liberal and conservatives found him too radical. In response, Rayburn himself quipped, "Fundamentally, I am a liberal conservative."

He was born on July 21, 1909, in Marshalltown, Iowa. His father, James Chalmers Rayburn, Sr., was a travelling evangelist for the Presbyterian church. His mother, Elna Beck Rayburn, was a strict disciplinarian who held down the fort in Newton, Kansas, where the family moved when Jim was eight. Jim was the oldest of four boys, all of whom became successful in their chosen careers. Growing up in a family of all boys no doubt fueled Jim's zest for adventure and fun.

Certainly, growing up with an evangelist father impacted Jim's understanding of and appreciation for the gospel. The senior Rayburn was a gifted communicator in his own right, and passed those gifts on to his oldest son.

But as much as the Rayburn parents talked about God's grace, the theology they lived by was very much a legalistic affair. It was only when Jim was on his own that he discovered in a deep way the boundless freedom God offers through Christ (as is discussed in his 1935 journal).

By the time Jim graduated from Kansas State College (now Kansas State University) in 1932, he had fallen in love with Helen Maxine Stanley, two and a half years his junior. After graduation Jim began graduate studies at the University of Colorado in Boulder, but quit after only a few courses in order to join his father's ministry. In September of that year, Jim and Maxine ran off and got married by a justice of the peace. Jim was twenty-three years old, and Maxine, twenty. When his parents found out, they were apoplectic, insisting on a second, "official," wedding, which was held in their home a few months later.

Maxine was quiet, sweet, and new to the Christian faith. Her parents had divorced when she was young, and her mother abandoned her when she was fourteen years old. She would deal with issues of abandonment and a lack of self-worth for many years to come. The fact that Maxine came from a broken home was a strike against her in Jim's parents' eyes.

Roy Riviere, who served at Jim's side for many years in Young Life, was asked to describe his old boss. Rayburn was of "comparatively small stature," Riviere observed, "but you would not look at him and think there was anything wrong—he just wasn't tall, he wasn't heavy. You couldn't possibly be around him long without finding out that what he *was* physically was really wound up tight. He was a formidable outdoorsman in the sense of hiking and mountain climbing and snow skiing, some of that sort of thing."

The two first met when Riviere was a high school student in Tyler, Texas, in the earliest days of Young Life. "He had a good speaking voice," Roy continued. "He had a western twang, but not any noticeable bad accent of any sort. I used to get a kick out of the fact that Jim really wanted to be a Texan, and I happened to know he came from Kansas. But he

managed to sound like the rest of us from Texas because he liked being a Texan, and of course that was a point in his favor, in my opinion.”

Jim was a dashing figure. He was a snappy dresser, but never in the over-the-top sort of way favored by many evangelical preachers of the time. Though only of average height, he managed to dominate any room that he entered, even when it included men who were older or more prominent than he. He prided himself in being comfortable with all types of people—from the most influential to the lowliest—and in his ability to put them at ease with his good nature and humor.

His prayer life was legendary. As you will see on these pages, it was not uncommon for Jim to spend hours on his knees. That intimacy with his Savior paid off—Jim had an uncommon ability to discern and communicate spiritual truth. He also had an uncanny ability, no doubt borne out of his hundreds of hours in God’s Word and in prayer, to “dream big dreams” for God—and see them come to fruition against all odds.

In 1934, Jim was hired by the Presbyterian Board of Missions to work in the small communities of Arizona and New Mexico. He became, he joked later, “the bishop of all out-of-doors,” filling in as pastor to places like Chama, New Mexico, and Douglas, Arizona.

While pastoring people of all ages, Jim realized that his real calling was with high school-aged people. The principles and approach that would later become Young Life began to formulate in his mind in these desolate little towns. Near the end of his life, he reflected, “I woke up with my bride one day in a town where there was a school full of people who didn’t have the foggiest chance to know the truth about Jesus Christ. They didn’t have a chance; there wasn’t anybody there that knew enough about Him to tell them. And, furthermore, they weren’t interested in listening to anyone who sounded like someone who might be going to get around to talking about Jesus Christ.”

Over the years the Lord brought many insights to Jim’s mind. Ideas like the fact that the key to effective evangelism was “gaining a sympathetic hearing” for the gospel: it wasn’t enough to proclaim the message



of Christ—the audience needed to be open to hearing it, and specifically to hearing it from the person delivering the message. Rayburn, and in turn, the entire Young Life staff, learned to do that by “earning the right to be heard.”

In Jim’s words, “Christ is the strongest, grandest, most attractive personality ever to grace the earth. But a careless messenger with the wrong method can reduce all this magnificence to the level of boredom ... it is a sin to bore anyone with the gospel.”

One of his favorite verses to explain Young Life’s approach was Colossians 4:5: “Walk in wisdom toward them that are without, redeeming the time” (KJV). Jim loved to explain how important it was to “walk in wisdom” toward non-Christians and all that doing so entailed.

The most essential part of walking in wisdom was the simple but too-often overlooked act of caring and showing an interest. Jim once commented, “Our young people today, six or eight million in the high school age alone, are waiting, waiting for somebody to care about them like [Christ did.] I mean there are six or eight million in our nation that nobody has ever talked to about Jesus Christ, that nobody has ever said a prayer for, that nobody has ever cared about. There are millions of them in our own nation, and they are waiting for somebody to care about them enough to take the time and trouble to pour out compassion on them, to prove their friendship, to bridge this tragic and terrible gap that exists in our culture between teenagers and adults—to emulate the example of Jesus Christ.”

While Jim fervently believed that “everyone has a right to know Jesus Christ, to know the facts concerning Him,” he also knew that Young Life’s resources were limited. As a result, Jim sought to reach the “up and outers” or “key kids” in hopes that they, in turn, would open the doors to the greater majority.

An illustration from the world of architecture may help explain Jim’s importance. Believed by many to be one of the most beautiful buildings in the world, St. Paul’s Cathedral in London was the crowning master-



piece of famed architect Sir Christopher Wren. Fittingly, he is buried in the cathedral's crypt. His grave, however, is not marked by an ornate monument, as was the style in that day. Instead, a simple black marble floor slab reads, *Lector, si monumentum requiris, circumspice*. "Reader, if you seek his monument, look all around you."

In much the same way, you will not find an ornate tomb or stone monument for Jim Rayburn (or even a simple gravesite, as Jim willed his body to science). If you seek his monument, simply look all around Young Life: every aspect of its ministry—and its flavor—stems from Jim Rayburn's personality. Its use of and appreciation for humor, its sense of adventure, and the speaking style employed in club messages, all began with Jim more than sixty years ago. The fact that Young Life has a vital camping program has its roots in Jim's own childhood vacations to Colorado. When Jim first suggested that Young Life own its own resorts for the high school crowd, most of those around him thought the idea was impracticable; now most cannot envision Young Life without them. The fact that since 1946 Young Life has been headquartered in Colorado Springs (and the subsequent migration there of other ministries, beginning with The Navigators in 1953) comes from Jim's personal love of the Rockies. Young Life's tradition of seeking excellence in all things comes directly from Jim, as does its emphasis on communicating the gospel clearly to its intended audience. And most importantly, the passion that Young Life has for Jesus Christ, and the emphasis it places on having a personal relationship with Him, comes directly from Rayburn.

But Jim's impact reaches far beyond the ministry he started. The thousands of churches who practice "seeker friendly" evangelism, and all who practice "friendship evangelism" can trace their legacy to the events recorded in these journals.

There was something different about Jim Rayburn and, in turn, Young Life. Unlike so many of his contemporaries, and many evangelical leaders who have followed since, Jim's motivation for telling others about Christ was never about reaching a certain goal. It was because, as

2 Corinthians 5:14 says, “Christ’s love compels us” (NIV)—put another way, Jim and his friends were so excited about life in Christ that they just had to share Him with others. As one of the early Young Life staff observed, Young Life was different because “we befriended the non-Christian.” And not just for a single meeting—Jim prayed that God would give Young Life “the teenagers, each one at least long enough for a meaningful confrontation with Thee.”

Though he believed in keeping statistics, Jim warned against putting much emphasis on their use. He sagely noted that “we’re never going to justify Young Life with numbers because our count may not match heaven’s.” That being said, it is still helpful as a measure of Jim’s impact to note that by 2007 the ministry that he founded had grown to a full-time staff of over 3,000 ministering in over 4,500 locations in 58 countries. More significantly, those staff were joined by 16,000 volunteer leaders and 11,000 committee members. Every year, over 60,000 young people visit Young Life’s twenty-one properties.

The figures stated above are merely the current figures. They do not count the tens of thousands of former Young Life staff and volunteer leaders who have gone on to impact the world through other ministries after having learned the relational style of ministry during their time in Young Life. And the statistics do not show the untold number of young people who first encountered Jesus Christ in a high school Young Life club. Over the years, literally millions of lives have been impacted by Young Life in one way or the other. Bill Starr, who followed Jim as the head of Young Life, said, “To me he was the greatest guy in my life. And as a Christian he’s had more influence than anybody else in the world.”

Jim Rayburn began keeping a daily journal when he was a young man, the first known diary being the one for 1935. He kept them through 1969, a year before his death. Not every one of those thirty-five years has a diary, although twenty-eight of them do.

They tell the tale of Jim's triumphs, his heartaches, his self-perceived failings, and his passion for his Savior. Jim's story—and his journals—are marked by breathtaking highs and soul-crushing lows.

Rayburn's son, Jim Rayburn III, became the custodian of the journals, keeping them safe and in good condition as the years after his father's death turned into decades. In 2005 Jim III asked me to undertake the project of putting the journals into a form that would make them accessible to the general public.

What follows is a distillation of the diaries. My role has been to provide needed context, and to stay out of the way as much as possible. It is my hope that by reading this book you will get to know Jim Rayburn—in his own voice, and in his own words. Jim's is an amazing story, and an even more amazing life. May you be encouraged and challenged by what you encounter in the pages that follow.

As Jim's longtime friend Ted Benson once said, "Praise God for the small-town Kansas boy who moved mountains and slew giants to make a path for the Gospel."

—KIT SUBLETT  
Houston, 2007