Lester Roloff 1914-1982 Evangelist Broadcaster

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Lester Roloff  
BORN: June 28, 1914 Dawson, Texas  
DIED: November 2, 1982 Houston, Texas  
LIFE SPAN: 68 years, 4 months, 5 days  
  
A MODERN-DAY PROPHET, and remembered well by many still living, Lester Roloff in the last years of his life had become a symbol and example to all who believe man ought to obey God rather than men. Until his death in an airplane crash in 1982, he was engaged in a battle against some of the forces of the State of Texas, primarily the Welfare Department--that would silence or greatly curtail his ministry if they could. The irony of it all is that he had done nothing but help change lives of countless youngsters who had nobody else to help them. It is hard to believe that the story you are now going to read could happen in America.  
  
Roloff was born on a farm ten miles south of Dawson, Texas, to Christian parents. He was saved in a little country church called Shiloh Baptist when about twelve, in a revival in July, 1926, under the ministry of John T. Taylor. High school was completed in Dawson. Reared on a farm he took his milk cow and went off to Baylor University in 1933 and milked his way through college. He graduated in 1937 with an A.B. degree.  
  
While at Baylor he was far from idle. He started pastoring among the Southern Baptists in a succession of pastorates. First was the Prairie Grove Mills Baptist Church in Navarro County where he had 67 converted in a revival to begin things. He also preached at his hometown church at Shiloh which was located outside of Dawson. Then he preached a revival at the First Baptist Church of Purden, Texas, and had 143 additions baptizing some 100 of them. This led to his call there while he retained the ministry at Navarro Mills. This latest venture happened his last year in college.  
  
Roloff went on to Southwestern Seminary in Fort Worth for three years, 1937 to 1940, while he maintained his ministry at Purden, going then to the First Baptist Church of Trinidad, Texas, his last year in seminary.  
  
He married Marie Brady on August 10, 1936, at the First Baptist Church of Galveston, Texas. They had two daughters, Elizabeth, born June 20, 1937, and Pamela Kay, an adopted daughter.  
  
From 1941 to 1944 he pastored the Magnolia Park Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, which had great crowds and much blessing. He was president of the local pastor's conference during some of this time. In 1944 he went to Corpus Christi where he spent the rest of his life. The Park Avenue Baptist Church extended a call to him, where he went in March 1944. On October 15, 1944, the church burned, and later property was purchased in another location of town and the church became known as the Second Baptist Church which he pastored from 1944 to 1951 with some 3,300 additions during this time. A branch mission church was started, called the West Heights Baptist Church.  
  
Roloff began a radio ministry on May 8, 1944, with his Family Altar Program, first broadcast over a 250-watt station locally. Soon it was on more than 22 stations, approximately 65 hours per week. By the early 1980s, it was broadcasting on more than 150 stations nationally. Some of the broadcasts were 15 minutes in length, some one-half hour. Starting on the small KEYS station, the program had an interesting history. Roloff was kicked off the radio ten months after he started his fight against liquor being a prime reason. The next day he started to broadcast on KWBU, a 50,000-watt station where he held fort for eight years. In 1954 the managers of KWBU decided to remove him because he was a controversial figure. Some businessmen bought the station, and he was again on the air for a year. But not for long. The new managers, like today, were "ratings" minded, and felt some more popular programs would bring in more listeners and more revenue. That squeezed Roloff's program off the air once again. However, within one year, the owners of the station lost more than $70,000.  
  
By this time, Roloff decided to try to buy the station and asked how much they wanted. The answer was $300,000, and Roloff didn't have a dime. However, with the help of God and the money of friends, $25,000 was put down as earnest money with $100,000 needed 90 days later. He had all the required funds, short of $7,250, on the last day. By the last hour, he was still short $250, but 45 minutes before the 2 p.m. deadline it was all there! Others of course became stock holders and owned the station, but Roloff was the vehicle used to get it in the right hands. After Roloff bought the station, it changed its call letters to KCIA.  
  
Roloff founded the Park Avenue Christian Day School in 1946. The school even now operates a kindergarten and continues through upper grades. His headquarters continue at the Park Avenue Day School, located on the property of the former Park Avenue Church.  
  
In April 1951 he resigned as pastor at Second Baptist Church to enter full-time evangelism. He founded the Roloff Evangelistic Enterprises, a non-profit organization which sponsors many projects of faith. In May 1955 he printed his first issue of Faith Enterprise, a quarterly publication dedicated to the salvation of lost souls and strengthening believers.  
  
In August of 1954, with convictions about being independent of the Southern Baptist Convention or any other denominational influence, he founded a church in Corpus Christi which was to be called the Alameda Baptist Church. He and four others put up $2,500 on ten and four-tenths acres of ground, and it was organized with 126 members on October 24. He pastored here until about 1961.  
  
On March 13, 1956, Roloff stood in Waco Hall, in Waco, Texas, and spoke to more than 2,000, giving his swan song to Baylor University. He stated all the issues in no uncertain terms. Other ministries soon developed. Roloff described at least six major ministries that he became responsible for:  
  
Thirty years ago, we started the Good Samaritan Rescue Mission that is still in operation. More than twenty years ago, the CITY OF REFUGE was started in an old Quonset hut given by Dr. Logan and put together by alcoholics at Lexington, Texas. The City of Refuge is now located in Culloden, Georgia, on 273 acres of an old antebellum home with lovely dormitories for men and women.  
  
The LIGHTHOUSE houseboat was built by Brother E.A. Goodman and taken down the Intracoastal Canal in 1958. On the way down, a boy fell off and went under this boat and missed the propeller. He was rescued by an unsaved boy who was going down to the Lighthouse for help, and one of our preacher boys, Bob Smith, who is now a missionary. This is where Bill Henderson, Ricky Banning and many others found God's will for their lives. We have preacher boys that come to the Lighthouse now studying for the ministry in other Christian schools. I have just dealt with three eighteen-year-old boys in Corpus Christi within the last week who are drug addicts. The Lighthouse is located forty miles down the Intracoastal Canal from Corpus Christi and it can only be reached by plane or by boat.  
  
The PEACEFUL VALLEY HOME for our older retired Christian friends is the prayer place. It is located near Mission and Edinburg, Texas, with many acres of citrus fruit and lovely vegetables that are grown there, in the midst of a lot of nice weather. This home is just for Christians who want to retire in a lovely place and still be of service to others. It began in 1969.  
  
The ANCHOR HOME FOR BOYS with three big two-story buildings for dormitories, a cafeteria, gymnasium, shop building and dining room, is located at Zapata, Texas. It has a capacity of nearly three hundred.  
  
The BETHESDA HOME FOR GIRLS in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, is for girls in trouble. It is a very beautiful home, located on Blue Lake, for both pregnant and delinquent girls. It has made many friends and received a warm welcome in Mississippi.  
  
The REBEKAH HOME FOR GIRLS, located in Corpus Christi, Texas, is our largest home. We have had fifteen hundred girls in about seven years and the three dormitories have a capacity of about three hundred beds. It is located on 440 acres of land. This has been the most miraculous work we have ever seen and has been fought and despised by the devil. I have never seen such miracles in all of my ministry. The REBEKAH CHRISTIAN ACADEMY is the school for the Rebekah Home. It has a beautiful two-story air-conditioned building with the finest of equipment.  
  
From 1961 to 1973 Roloff was developing these varied enterprises, and ministering as an evangelist in many churches, plus carrying on his radio ministry. He was an ex-  
perienced pilot, having flown about 12,000 hours in his 1966 Queen Air that a friend helped him to get, and also his 1968 Cessna Skywagon that was used for Lighthouse work, which   
could land on the beach with people and provisions. These planes belonged to the Enterprises and had their own mechanic and radio men to maintain them and help fly them. Roloff   
landed his plane at least four times on one engine, and in unusual places such as a highway. His flying lessons began in 1958.

His themes through the years had been Christ Is the Answer and Now the Just Shall Live by Faith.The last of his varied works of good will--which, by the way, made no charges for those they helped, was the Rebekah Home in Corpus Christi, which was the scene of controversy during his remaining years--and, in fact, still is. This was founded in 1967 along with the People's Church, a place where girls in trouble could get worship as they got straightened out. This school specialized in taking cases other agencies and homes refused to take. And no wonder--Roloff got results. He ran his schools by Bible directives and naturally got Bible results--changed lives. Over $3,000,000 were tied up in the Rebekah project alone.

In September, 1970, the Gulf Coast storm Celia hit, but miraculously did not touch the Lighthouse, nor their home, although severe damage was almost everywhere else. In   
1971 their homes were filled to capacity, and they had to start turning people away. In May, 1972, the Roloffs moved into their lovely, large new home on the acreage where the   
Rebekah Home and other buildings were already located. Another 118 acres of land was purchased. It had a runway on it for their plane, and they could farm some of the remaining   
acres.

During the summer of 1972, workers built another big two-story building, which became the Rebekah Christian School.At the close of 1972 they had four days of dedication for the following new items: chapel at the Intracoastal Canal; their new home; the land adjoining the Enterprises property; a big new boys' home at Zapata, Texas; five new units at the Peaceful Valley Home; the high two-story dormitory at the Rebekah Home; the two-story Rebekah School; and the Peo-  
ple's Church, which is nearly two blocks long.  
The battle with the State of Texas developed ironically out of one of the most compassionate ministries done anywhere. Rebekah Home was founded as a place to help girls in trouble by giving them the answer--which is Christ. A Dallas probation officer attests to the fact the place to   
send young people in trouble is Roloff's work. Children rejected elsewhere were welcomed with open arms and a book could be written, telling of the amazing changed lives. Some of the young men from the Lighthouse have married some of the girls from Rebekah Home ("the bumblebees meeting the honeybees").

The talk of licensing began in 1971. This threatened to shut the work down, unless they conformed to rules and regulations that would have greatly increased the cost of the operation without improving on what they were doing. Roloff's legal problems began in April, 1973, when the state Welfare Department filed a suit in an attempt to have his Rebekah Home licensed. Had Roloff agreed to do this, he would then have had to follow Welfare Department guidelines, which would have been totally alien to Bible principles and the philosophy upon which the girls' home was founded. Roloff had no desire to fight the Welfare Department or put them out of business, but simply wanted this unconstitutional interference to stop. It was government interference with religion. "Licensing a church home is as unnecessary and wrong as licensing a   
church," Roloff contended. At issue was the constitutional principle of separation of church and state.

If licensed, the home would have been required to hire a home supervisor who holds a degree in social work and who is approved by the Welfare Department. That supervisor would be required to complete an additional fifteen hours of college level social studies every two years. Not only that but the home would be required to file financial reports regularly with the state Welfare Department. The home would also have to hire one state-approved worker for every eight girls.   
The home would also be forced to serve foods from a menu prepared by the Welfare Department. The Welfare Department also objected to Bible discipline, which would have to be eliminated. (Translation: no spanking or other corporal punishment.) One could readily see that Roloff would not be running the home he gave birth to, so naturally he chose to fight this invasion of privacy. When the welfare officials appeared, he asked them what they wanted. When they presented new rules he simply took out his Bible and told them he was satisfied with God's rules.

On August 3, 1973, an injunction was signed, in which Roloff was enjoined from operating a child care institution without a license for those under sixteen years of age. On October 5, 1973, a district judge heard the case and fined Roloff $500 and $80 in court costs for contempt of court when he refused welfare guidelines. With Roloff refusing to have the home licensed, the Welfare Department leveled charges of brutality against the home, based upon the testimony of a few   
of the girls. This adverse publicity was widespread. It was found that, of the 1,500 girls who had spent time at Rebekah Home, fewer than a dozen could be found who would testify against it. One set of parents were found willing to testify for the Welfare Department. None of the 1,490 who were helped or thankful for the home or their parents were consulted. Finally, on January 31, 1974, the case went to court again in Corpus Christi and Roloff was found guilty--fined $5,400 and sentenced to five days in the county jail on contempt of court charges. The court also ordered him to "purge the home," which would mean to "dump the girls into the street." On February 4th he was given the opportunity to present his argument on the constitutionality of state licensing of a church-operated home before the Provisions Committee of the Texas State Senate. What was to have been a five-minute presentation blossomed into a three-hour session   
when the senators began questioning Roloff on the accomplishments and problems of Rebekah Home. His jail term was limited to one day, February 12, pending appeal to the Texas State   
Supreme Court, and the fine was stayed as well, pending appeal. He was released from jail on a writ of habeas corpus. On March 24, 1974, Roloff and his attorneys appeared before the nine judges of the State Supreme Court of Texas in a hearing to determine if a discharge of the charges could be obtained. This request was made on the grounds that the judgment was ambiguous and unclear in that it does not define what age constitutes a child or children. The former policy was that individuals up to age sixteen were considered children, but a recent state attorney general's ruling stated a person to be a child up to age eighteen. Questions were also   
raised in the minds of the judges as to what constituted a child-care home. Answers were unclear from the Welfare Department and, in one instance, contradictory. The high court agreed that children sixteen or over could be cared for by Roloff and as a result overturned the contempt of court charges May 20, 1974. Roloff received the news May 29, while at Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina, receiving an award "for those who have made special contributions to the defense of the faith." The Austin decision of the Supreme Court, however, did not end the fight. The Welfare Department has since been adamant in getting the under eighteen years of age law declared as needing a welfare license. Roloff continued to help girls of any age who came to him for help. He estimated that, while he could not actively recruit for the younger ages, would there be no harassment, he could handle up to 700 young people over against his approximate 200 who were then cared for. To illustrate the problem, two girls, aged 13 and 15, ran away after two warnings for other offenses. They were told they would be spanked for the next violation. They were found four days later in a locked bar. They had spent this time with ten men and had a woeful story to tell. Roloff kept his word and spanked them. Word got out about the incident   
and Roloff was served a summons for child abuse. At the hearing the girls admitted the offenses and the spankings. The judge declared Roloff could keep them until the trial. Roloff   
refused until the judge would ask them a question as to where they would like to go--back to Roloff or to some alternate arrangement. Hugging their "daddy" with great affection they   
said they wanted to be with Brother Roloff.

By March, 1975, the Texas Welfare Department had filed against Roloff again for contempt and for being in violation of their rules and regulations. The Rebekah Home now housed only 200 girls, half of what they had previously when forced to close. Even more tragic was that they turned away 3,000 during the legal problems. A legislative bill slipped through the Texas State   
Senate on March 13, 1975, clearly aimed, many people felt, at outlawing the Roloff homes and work. It passed through the Texas House of Representatives in May, 1975. In June another   
court order was issued whereby they would be held in further contempt if they did not allow inspection of the premises of their homes. They allowed the inspections, having nothing to   
hide.

On July 4 and 5, 1975, a great rally was held in Garland and Dallas, Texas, where hundreds of people gathered to join in the battle, with such as Jack Hyles and Bob Jones, III, addressing the crowds. On July 25, shortly thereafter, the Lighthouse dormitory burned to the ground. Later, a tall boy got saved and confessed to setting the fire.

By January 1, 1976, the new guidelines by the Welfare Department became law, making it illegal for unlicensed homes to take in children under the age of eighteen. In May, 1976, a judge order instructed Roloff Enterprises to allow state welfare workers to inspect the homes. This time Roloff refused. On June 3 a great rally with some 400 people was held in Austin, preceding Roloff's court appearance to fight state licensing. Again he was put in jail on June 21. He was re-  
leased June 25, just prior to his 62nd birthday. He was fined $1,750 also. In the fall of 1976 a final ruling was laid down, giving him freedom until the Supreme Court of the United States would hear the case.’

On November 1, 1977, a great freedom rally was held at the convention center in Dallas. Great crowds came, including over 1,500 preachers, and public sentiment again swelled for Roloff. Nearly a year later, on October 2, 1978, the United States Supreme Court ruled against hearing the case from Corpus Christi. Attorney General John Hill of Texas said the case was frivolous, and the justices must have believed it. Appearing on the nationwide CBS television program   
60 Minutes with Mike Wallace on October 22, 1978, gave Roloff some favorable national coverage long overdue. Then, on November 7, this same thorn-in-the-flesh, John Hill, was de-  
feated in his bid for governor of Texas by William Clements in a very close election. Clements indicated he would use his powers to free Roloff from all charges.It seems that even now, a decade later, Roloff's case, still in litigation, is being considered a test case by many. What happens may determine the ultimate status of many other preachers.

On the morning of November 2, 1982, Lester Roloff donned his pilot's clothing and boarded his Cessna Skywagon for the last time, on his way to a preaching engagement at the Calvary Baptist Church of Kansas City, Missouri. With him were three members of his men's quartet and an assistant. Approximately one hundred miles north of Houston, at 10:00 a.m., the plane disappeared off radar screens. There was much stormy weather in the area. The wreckage of the aircraft was later found by sheriff's deputies. All five aboard were killed when the craft smashed into the ground.Though shocked and stunned at the sudden home-going of their founder and other close associates, the Roloff Enterprises vowed to continue the fight. Lester Roloff's per-  
sonal battle was over, but legal battles continue to this day. Currently, the Rebekah Home has been closed, and the Lighthouse has not been allowed to reopen after reconstruction. Two other homes remain open.Perhaps justice will still be meted out.