



THE

MY JOURNEY THROUGH

OTHER SIDE

PEARL HARBOR

OF INFAMY

AND THE WORLD OF WAR

JIM DOWNING

WITH JAMES LUND

Lieutenant James Downing didn't just survive Pearl Harbor—he fought there. On the deck of his battleship, with Japanese planes raining down, he faced the flames of a man-made hell. And now he takes us back, to the day when evil failed to destroy faith and to the birth of a new American spirit, one that reigns to this day. *The Other Side of Infamy* is a priceless story by the rarest of authors: a battleship man at Pearl Harbor. There is no higher title.

**ADAM MAKOS**

*New York Times* bestselling author of *A Higher Call*

Jim Downing's story of courage, resilience, and faith is a must-read. He was already an original member of The Navigators ministry when he was caught up in the middle of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Jim ran into danger knowing his eternal destiny was secure—and his whole life has been devoted to sharing that hope with others.

**JIM DALY**

President of Focus on the Family

Jim Downing's memoir of his war years is both heart stirring and motivational. I read the book in two days, putting aside everything else I could.

**GARY COOMBS**

Shadow Mountain Community Church

*The Other Side of Infamy* is the compelling and beautiful story of an ordinary man experiencing extraordinary, world-changing events while abiding in Christ, meditating on his Word, and following Jesus in everything. It has been my great privilege to count Jim Downing as my friend and mentor for several decades. I can assure you that this remarkable story is not mere fiction.

**ROBBY BUTLER**

Editor of *Stubborn Perseverance*



# THE OTHER SIDE OF INFAMY

MY JOURNEY THROUGH PEARL HARBOR  
AND THE WORLD OF WAR

JIM  
DOWNING

WITH JAMES LUND

NAVPRESS 

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*The Other Side of Infamy: My Journey through Pearl Harbor and the World of War*

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## PROLOGUE

SOFT LIGHT REFLECTED by a nearly full moon bathes a peaceful Pacific island in a blanket of white. Azure ocean waves lap gently at still-warm sandy beaches. Koa trees in lush rain forests stretch for the sky while hibiscus flowers in verdant gardens wait for their next opportunity to bloom.

It is another enchanting Saturday night on the tropical paradise called Oahu, and most of the thousands of American servicemen and -women stationed here are ready to give in to its charms. Some who are advanced in rank enjoy a dance at an officers' club. Many enlisted men partake of the pleasures offered in downtown Honolulu: taverns and shops with names such as Two Jacks, the Mint, and the New Emma Café; a variety show at the Princess titled "Tantalizing Tootsies"; and a host of shooting galleries, tattoo joints, and the like. Thousands of other military personnel remain on their ship or base and listen to music, watch a movie, or write a letter to a loved one. Nearly everyone, it seems, is ready to relax, have a good time, and forget about worries and responsibilities for a while.

The date is December 6, 1941.

I am also on Oahu this night. I am a gunner's mate first class and ship's postmaster serving on a navy battleship, the USS *West Virginia*. After returning to Pearl Harbor on Friday from a thirteen-day patrol, I finished up my duties and left the ship at noon on Saturday. The harbor was packed—all eight active-duty Pacific Fleet battleships were in port, along with small craft and Coast Guard vessels, 164 ships in total. The lines at the bus stop were so long that two buses came and went before I could finally catch one and head home.

I was eager to get home. I'd married my new bride, a beautiful girl with auburn hair named Morena Holmes, on July 11. Newlyweds do not like to spend weeks apart.

We are staying with a civilian couple, Harold and Belva DeGroff, in Honolulu's Kalihi Valley. Their large home also serves as local headquarters for The Navigators, a fledgling Christian organization dedicated to spreading the message of the gospel. Harold is in charge. Morena and I are active in the movement.

Which explains why on this Saturday night, I am not at a dance, in downtown Honolulu, or otherwise occupied. The DeGroffs are taking the weekend off. I've been assigned to fill in for Harold and lead the evening meeting for more than a hundred men and women of faith, as well as a few others who've arrived to see what we are up to. The DeGroff home is built on stone piling about six feet off the ground. The huge crawl space underneath is our auditorium, complete with benches, chairs, and a sawdust floor. After a period of singing, quoting memorized Bible verses, and sharing personal stories, I deliver

a brief message. Then someone gives a final prayer, and we send the crowd into the night.

It's been a time of enjoyable fellowship, a wonderful evening. None of us realize that several in our group will not live to see another day.



On Sunday morning, the aroma of fresh-cooked eggs and sizzling bacon greets me as I take a chair at the large table in the kitchen. There are eight of us—seven navy men and Joe Bodie, an army corporal who snuck away from his base last night to attend our meeting. The guys stayed over at the house to enjoy a good night's sleep and the hearty breakfast that Morena, wearing an apron, now begins to serve.

The rest of the men are in uniform, but since I'm home, I'm wearing a Hawaiian shirt. Soon I'll get dressed for church. Harold will be back home this afternoon. He'll set up the radio on the front porch, and a group of us will gather for evangelist Charles Fuller's *Old Fashioned Revival Hour*. As we listen, we'll enjoy our view of the sunshine, the heavy green foliage covering both sides of the mountains rising out of our valley, and the winding stream across the street.

I'm looking forward to it. After two weeks on patrol, nothing sounds better than a quiet day with friends and my new bride.

It is a few minutes before 8 a.m.

As I raise a fork to my mouth, the sound of a distant explosion reaches my ears. Soon there are more explosions. The army often tests gun emplacements on Sunday mornings, so the sound of heavy gunfire is not unusual. I've heard a rumor

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that a German battleship is in the area, as well as three British cruisers set on sinking her. I wonder if the German ship is under attack and heading for the safety of our harbor, since under international law it can remain protected in a neutral port for twenty-four hours before either surrendering or returning to battle.

As we sit at breakfast speculating, I can't resist the opportunity to needle the lone army man in our midst. "It can't be the army," I say to Joe Bodie. "They're shooting too fast." This draws a few chuckles.

Suddenly we hear the shriek of an incoming shell. It speeds over the roof and strikes in our backyard, leaving a crater that I later learn is twenty-five feet across.

All of us at the table stare at each other. Something is very wrong.

One of the navy men leaps to his feet and turns on a radio in the corner. In the next moment, Harold DeGroff appears in the doorway, his face white—he'd been on his way home and was in the yard when the shell struck.

Before Harold can speak, the voice of a Honolulu broadcaster fills the room: "I have phoned army and navy intelligence and they have advised us that the island of Oahu is under enemy attack. The enemy has not been identified. Stay tuned. We'll give more information when we get it."

There isn't time to think about who is attacking or why or what the ramifications are for America and the world. There is time only to act. I glance at Morena. "I've got to get back to the ship." I run to our bedroom, throw on my uniform. The sound of explosions is continual now. When I emerge, the radio

broadcaster speaks again: “Pearl Harbor is under enemy attack. The enemy has been identified as Japan. All servicemen return to your ship or station.”

A black sedan comes roaring into the driveway. Herb Goeldner, a ship-fitter first class on the USS *Argonne*, had also spent the night with us. But since he teaches a Sunday morning Bible study class on his ship, he left the house in his car a few minutes earlier. After seeing planes and bombs, he turned around and came back to pick us up.

I run out of the house, Morena close behind. Kalihi Valley is surrounded by mountains on both sides, so I can't see Pearl Harbor. What I can see is ominous black smoke filling the sky.

Two of the navy men jump into Herb's car. I stop next to the car and turn to face my wife. Will I ever see her again? I gaze into her frightened hazel eyes for the briefest moment. We kiss. Then I slide into the car.

“Deuteronomy 33:27!” Morena shouts at me. “The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms.”

As Herb's car pulls away, I give Morena a little wave. She's still wearing her apron. She has tears in her eyes.



The road from our house in the valley to the harbor is lined by thick vegetation topped by coconut palm trees. Normally the picturesque journey takes less than twenty minutes. On this frantic morning, however, nothing is normal. Herb flies down the street as fast as possible, but traffic is a mess of more cars like ours, loaded with men trying to get to their posts.

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As we approach, I see Japanese planes diving at the harbor. “Where are *our* planes?” cries Ken Watters, a yeoman on the admiral’s staff on the *Maryland*. I hear the mixture of anger and anguish in his voice.

We finally reach the base gate where Marine Harold Blakeslee, another fellow Navigator, waves us through. I learn later than Blakeslee is lucky to still be standing; a strafing bullet has gone through the cuff of his pants.

We park, pile out of the car, and run to the boat landing at Merry Point, located just south of the office of Admiral Husband E. Kimmel, commander in chief of the Pacific Fleet. When I look past Kuahua Peninsula to Ford Island and “Battleship Row,” where the *West Virginia* and the rest of our finest warships are moored, I am shocked.

Everywhere the Japanese have struck us, there is devastation and horror.

The *Oklahoma* is upside down. The *Arizona* is belching black smoke and red flames like a volcano. The *West Virginia*, which we crewmen affectionately call the “Wee Vee,” is sinking and on fire above the waterline. The first wave of the attack has ended, but enemy planes still zigzag across the sky, their crews seeking to inflict further damage. The air is heavy with the odor of gunpowder mixed with smoke.

I know in that moment that many of my shipmates and friends are already dead.

I have always appreciated history. I am aware that the Japanese have employed the tactic of surprise attack before, in 1904, against the Russian fleet. Rage wells up inside me. I can’t believe we’ve allowed them to do it to us.

The motor launches that would normally take us to Ford Island and to our ships aren't running. They're too busy trying to pick up men who've either jumped or been blown by bombs into the water. I can't see it just yet, but the water surrounding our battleships is covered by a layer of oil spilling out from gaping holes in the ships. The oil is on fire. The men who've gone overboard are burning alive.

Ken Watters and I have both arrived carrying our Bibles and notebooks, ready to do spiritual battle as well as naval warfare. Then it occurs to Ken that books may not be practical at the moment. "Looks like we're going to need both hands," he says. I spot a fire extinguisher rack at the boat landing. We store our materials there.

A few more navy men join us at the dock. Our group of about ten decides to strike out on foot for the ferry landing across the water from the south end of Ford Island. We begin walking rapidly in that direction, our ears bombarded by the constant drone of Japanese planes flying overhead and by the punctuated bursts of our own anti-aircraft guns.

Suddenly the sound of a single engine overpowers the rest.

A plane is bearing down on our group. It dives at us from an angle and banks, startlingly low, perhaps forty feet above the ground and eighty feet away. It's olive drab in color, so for an instant I think it's one of ours.

The image freezes in my mind—the cockpit cover off, the pilot, goggles on, focused, so close that even his eyes and teeth are visible, smoke emitting from the machine guns.

I drop to the ground at the same time that the sound of machine-gun fire reaches my ears.

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The plane roars past. I turn my head. The plane levels out, revealing a rising sun under its wing. On the dirt road behind me, dust rises from a trench dug by bullets.

I have had no hatred of the Japanese. I am a Christian. I know the Bible and the verses that say to love your enemy. I believe wholeheartedly in God and in the wisdom of following his instructions.

Still, the instinct to survive is a strong one, one of our strongest. This war just became personal. My enemy has just tried to kill me.

If he comes back, I will defend myself. If I have to, I will shoot him dead.

★ 1 ★

## DREAMS AND SHADOWS

A WISP OF SMOKE and the sizzles and snaps of a crackling fire emanated from a huge wood stove in the center of the room. Seven men were gathered on “loafer’s benches” around the inviting warmth, most with a pipe protruding from one corner of their mouths and a wad of chewing tobacco in the other. The men were in their fifties and sixties, wore overalls, and had beards and unruly hair in dire need of a barber’s scissors. Every few moments, one or two in the group let loose a stream of tobacco juice in the direction of a two-foot-wide spittoon near the stove. They missed as often as they hit their target.

The men were not alone. I was there too, a four-year-old boy wearing a homemade blue denim shirt and overalls. I sat

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on the lap of one man for several minutes until I was gently passed on, one lap to the next, welcomed by each of the men into their circle. I listened and tried to understand as the “loafers” discussed issues of the day. It was October 1917.

My father, Claude Casey (C. C.) Downing, owned the country store in my hometown of Plevna, Missouri, population 110. Since my father and my mother, Estelle Downing, both worked at the store, I spent most of my preschool days there as well. Our store was more than a business: The thirty-by-eighty-foot building with tall windows across the front and a hitching post for horses on the side served as one of our town’s social centers—especially for the regulars who gathered each day around the stove. I was a silent member of the Spit and Argue Club, as the men were known. I loved it.

The primary topic of conversation on this day was the state of the war in Europe. It seems that from my earliest days, the military ambitions of the world’s nations and the men who led them were a presence looming over my life.

The Great War officially began in 1914. I’d been born eleven months before at my family’s home in Oak Grove, Missouri, a small town on the eastern outskirts of Kansas City. My great uncle, Dr. Jim Downing, did the honors, ushering me into the world on August 22, 1913. Apparently my parents were so grateful that they named me after him. My middle name, Willis, came from my mother’s father and grandfather, Willis Anderson Jr. and Willis Anderson Sr.

With my birth, our family expanded to five. Besides my parents, I joined my sister, Dorothy (four years older) and my brother Donald (two years older). My younger brother, A. J.,

was born two years after me. At the time of my arrival, I doubt my parents and siblings had war on their minds, but others in the world must have seen it coming. An arms race and complex alliances among European nations, combined with conflict in the Balkans, made an outbreak of hostilities increasingly likely. The assassination in Sarajevo of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, ignited the deadly conflict.

My companions at the store, along with the vast majority of Americans, had favored staying out of the matter. Isolationism, they said, had served the country well since the days of George Washington and would continue to do so. Our greatest allies in the world, it was thought, were the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

But Germany's aggressive U-boat campaign, which took US lives with the sinking of the passenger liner RMS *Lusitania*, combined with news of an intercepted German message inviting Mexico to join in a war against America, proved too provoking for the nation to stay neutral. On April 6, 1917, Congress declared war on Germany and began sending materials and men to assist the Allies.

Six months later, the Spit and Argue Club now gathered around the stove debating the progress of the war with an intensity that did not match their otherwise laid-back appearance and kindly nature. Though I didn't understand it then, their depth of feeling was not surprising. Plevna had been founded only a generation earlier by immigrants from Bulgaria. The scope of the war included the homeland of my older friends. It was being fought by their relatives.

Though I did not follow all that was said, the conversations that passed just over my head between discharges of tobacco

juice had a great influence on me. My companions were unanimously and unequivocally against “the Germans,” blaming them for starting the war. I’d recently begun hearing the terms *Germans* and *germs*; I took them both to mean the same thing—something very bad.

In addition to gaining my first appreciation for the toil and toll of war, I suspect that I also acquired my contrary nature and passion for debate from these men. My mother may have suspected it too, for she made it clear she did not consider the loafers to be favorable role models. Theirs looked like a pretty good life to me, however, and I made plans to join their ranks as soon as possible.



My family’s move from Oak Grove to Plevna was the result of a gift. After my parents married, my mother’s parents gave them sixty acres of land near their Plevna-area home. They hoped the land would keep us close by. My father bought a custom kit for \$2,500 and built a three-bedroom home there that overlooked acres of virgin timber to the east. To the north were the Little Fabius River and a valley that included rich, black soil, ideal for farming.

But Dad, well-educated and ambitious, wasn’t destined to be a farmer. He soon sold much of the land, rented a house for fifteen dollars a month, and purchased the hardware store on the dirt road that was Plevna’s main street.

We offered just about everything at our store that a Plevna citizen might need: guns and ammunition, dry goods and groceries, clothing, drugs, and home remedies. Farmers brought in

chickens, eggs, rabbits, cream, and other items that they sold to my father to raise cash for their purchases.

The store also housed the Plevna post office. As the store owner, my father followed tradition by serving as postmaster. The US Post Office Department furnished stamps and authorized my father to keep the income from their sales as his salary. Technically it was against the law for anyone but my father to enter the postal enclosure in the corner of the store, but everyone in our family took a turn there, selling stamps and other items. When evenings at the store wore on and I got sleepy, I opened the door to the postal section, made a bed of the stack of empty mail sacks, and slept until my mother awakened me and took me home.

Life in Plevna was primitive by today's standards, though we never saw it that way. The average home, including ours, had no indoor plumbing. It was traditional to take a Saturday-night bath. The facility for this was a tin washtub, thirty inches in diameter. By each Friday, the combination of wearing underclothing, long johns, and the same socks for a week produced a noticeable supply of "toe jam." Other sanitary duties required a trip to the outhouse.

In addition to operating the store and post office, my father served as president of the local bank he had founded, earning a salary of ninety dollars a month. My brothers and I supplemented this income by trapping muskrats, which sold for \$1.15 per pelt. Once, I found I'd caught a mink instead of a muskrat. The \$18.50 I received for the mink pelt was just enough to cover the cost of a new coat.

Most of the rest of the population of Plevna worked hard to

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make a living as farmers. The main crops in our area were corn, oats, and timothy hay, as well as wheat and specialized crops such as “kafir corn,” a popcorn-like grain. The men plowed and harrowed the soil, then planted their seeds in the spring (or fall, in the case of wheat). The first stage of harvesting began about four months later.

Oats, timothy, and wheat had to be threshed to separate the grain from the pods in which it grew. The farmers mowed the standing grain with a horse-drawn machine called a binder, which tied the stalks into bundles ten inches in diameter. Laborers followed the binder and neatly stacked the bundles in round piles with the grain at the top. These architecturally perfect piles were called shocks. The grain dried out in four to six weeks, by the middle of August.

Threshing day was the farm event of the year. Every community owned a threshing machine made up of two distinct units. The first was a steam engine that looked like a small locomotive. It turned a flywheel, three feet in diameter. The second unit was a separator, a large tin box on wheels that was twenty feet long, eight feet high, and five feet wide. Inside the box was a sophisticated series of belts and rotating iron axles with lugs and spikes to pound the grain from its pod. The separator was powered by a belt from the steam-engine flywheel.

On threshing day, a man wielding a pitchfork tore down the shocks and spread the bundles to dry out the morning dew. A little later, more men arrived to load the bundles onto wagons and transport them to the thresher. As the bundles were fed into the threshing machine, a line of wagons stood ready to receive the grain and haul it to the barn or granary.

My brothers and I sometimes volunteered to help tear down the shocks, but we had an ulterior motive. We liked to capture nonvenomous snakes living in the shocks, which we would then tie to the bundle with twine we carried for just that purpose. When a farmer arrived to toss the bundles onto his wagon with a pitchfork, he inevitably came to one we'd specially prepared. The result was great entertainment for the Downing brothers. As the bundle and wiggling snake flew through the air, the farmer would try to knock the snake down, not knowing it was tied to the bundle. The poor snake would jump in every direction, trying to escape.

I am not aware that anyone ever discovered our plot. If they had, I might not be here today.

Threshing day was a community enterprise. The separator and steam engine moved from farm to farm until everyone's grain was threshed. It didn't matter if the farm was large or small. The objective was to get everyone's threshing done before the fall rains came. No money changed hands between farmers. They and the other men in the community exchanged labor freely, joyfully, and competitively to see who could do the most for someone else.

Women exhibited the same cooperative and enthusiastic spirit. While the men were in the field, their wives gathered at the home of the host to prepare a meal unrivaled for quality, quantity, and variety. These women brought their finest canned goods and used their favorite recipes to create a banquet of fried chicken, smoked ham, sweet corn, mashed potatoes, sweet potatoes, cooked and fresh tomatoes, and fresh peas and beans. The feast was supplemented with lettuce, radishes, cantaloupe,

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watermelon, preserved pears, and dried apples and peaches. For drink, the wives served iced tea and lemonade, and for dessert they offered blackberry, gooseberry, cherry, lemon, custard, rhubarb, apple, peach, mincemeat, pumpkin, and chocolate pies topped with real whipped cream, as well as every kind of cake, covered with thick icing and coconut.

The big meal was served at noon. When the dinner bell rang, the field laborers came to the house to water their horses and gorge themselves. After the meal, they lay down in the shade for half an hour, then continued threshing until darkness fell.

I spent a week every summer at my grandparents' farm. I always hoped my visit would coincide with threshing season. When it did, I rode in the grain wagon and buried my bare feet in the sweet-smelling mass of wheat kernels. At noon I ate until I couldn't sit up straight. My favorites were the fried chicken and custard pies. I was thankful to not be a city boy.

It seems that in America today we take great pride in our independence. But in those days we had to depend on each other. The attitude was, "I'll help you, you help me." If you needed to borrow a piece of machinery or a horse, you asked a neighbor. As far as I know, no one was ever turned down. If one family knew of another in need, someone—usually the wife—would take an item off the shelf at home and give it to them, as quietly as possible so as not to embarrass the family. That was just the way things worked.

We also bartered. Not every small community enjoyed such services, but Plevna was blessed by the presence of Dr. John Hayden, a country doctor. Dr. Hayden never had an office. He went where the people were and was available

twenty-four hours a day. His patients often did not have money to reimburse him, however. Instead of cash, people would give him a jar of jam, vegetables from the garden, or some other item as payment. This is why Dr. Hayden's home looked like a grocery store.

Dr. Hayden didn't mind. After all, he wasn't trying to get rich, and he always had something to eat.

This spirit of interdependence and cooperation extended to our churches. There were three in Plevna: Methodist, Disciples of Christ, and the one we attended, Southern Baptist. They were far apart in doctrine, yet they operated as one for community projects. The churches rotated the annual Christmas party, each one hosting all of the town's children. They also rotated summer revival meetings. Our churches set the moral tone for Plevna both spiritually and socially, exploiting what they had in common rather than their differences.

Our community was not flawless. We had our share of small-time criminals, and it was common knowledge as to who was having an affair with whom. But people had their way of dealing with these issues. They shunned the criminals and accepted without stigma the children who were thought to be illegitimate. The system may have been imperfect, but it seemed to work.



The Great War ended when Germany signed an armistice with the Allies on November 11, 1918. I was five years old. At the outset of the war, President Woodrow Wilson had declared that "the world must be made safe for democracy." People across the

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country were now declaring that mission accomplished. My memory of the local people's reaction is that they were just glad the handful of boys from our community could come home.

My friends in the Spit and Argue Club moved on to other topics. A year later, I moved on as well, when I started first grade.

My teacher was a short woman with brown hair—straight on the sides, bangs in front—that made her head look square. She was a wonderful person. I've often said that the highest compliment a student can pay his teacher is to still remember her name a few years after completing the class. After nearly a century, I still recall the name of Beulah Foster—as well as the names of the rest of my Plevna teachers.

We children were expected to sit in our desks, face the blackboard, and pay attention. The Plevna school was a one-room operation with a partition dividing high school students from the rest of the grades. Two teachers handled the duties on each side. In grades one through eight, we never had more than five or six students per class on our side of the building, while the high school enrolled twenty at the most.

Our instructional materials were limited to a huge dictionary, a globe of the world, some maps on the wall, and a set of encyclopedias. We studied the basics: reading, writing, and arithmetic. Current events in the nation and world were rarely discussed because we had little knowledge of them. You could say that we were isolated.

In late fall and early winter, the dirt roads around Plevna got so muddy that no one could leave town until the mud froze. We did have two weekly newspapers, the *Edina Sentinel*

and *Knox County Democrat*. These mostly reported local stories about everyone's health and who was visiting whom. Thanks to my father, we also had mail service at two cents for a letter and a penny for a postcard. Otherwise, our communication with the outside world depended on the telephone and word of mouth.

Mrs. Hannah Lockett was the Plevna switchboard operator, which she ran from her home. When a call came from the outside world, Mrs. Lockett patched a line on her switchboard between the caller and the intended recipient. Almost every home had a phone, a creation mounted on the wall with two bells at the top and a microphone that protruded from the middle, resembling Pinocchio's nose. The overall effect was of a robot with giant eyes. To make a call, the originator picked up the receiver and turned a hand crank, which sent a signal to a central switchboard.

It was too expensive for families to own an individual line, so six to eight homes shared a line. Since outside news was limited, it was generally assumed that no matter whose phone was called, others on the party line were listening in and might even participate in the conversation.

During nearly every thunderstorm, lightning struck the telephone lines somewhere. To protect the instruments inside homes from being burned out, every house had a quick release hook for disconnecting the line when a storm was brewing. Reconnecting the line was a hazardous act. I was probably seven years old the first time I was assigned this duty. I went just outside the front door in my bare feet, stood in the wet grass, and grasped the end of one wire in my left hand and the other wire in my right, making my body a handy electrical conductor.

Naturally, someone on our party line chose that moment to place a call. I'd been warned that I might feel a "tickle" when I put the wires together. The feeling was closer to a football tackle. The voltage generated by the powerful magneto produced a shock so strong that I could not let go of the wires until the caller finally stopped cranking. I was not electrocuted, but the sensation was remarkably and uncomfortably close.

My school years coincided with the Roaring Twenties. For city dwellers in America and around the world, this meant jazz music, women known as flappers, the age of the automobile, and unprecedented economic growth. Some of these exciting changes even reached our tiny community. Our grandfather purchased a 1911 Ford Model T, which I began driving at the age of eleven. I couldn't see over the steering wheel, so I guided the car by looking out the side. Our cars were designed for open touring. The public was slow to accept the glassed-in sedan as they considered glass a death warrant if there was an accident.

The Twenties was also the era of Prohibition, a nationwide ban on the sale and production of alcoholic beverages. It was also the era of the gangsters, who defied and exploited the new law. One day I was driving to school on the highway when I spotted a big limousine in the distance ahead of me. The limo driver had taken a corner too fast on the slick road and slid into the ditch. As I approached, a man in a fashionable black suit and cap was trying to push the limo back onto the road. Another man sat at the wheel.

I pulled to a stop in front of them. "Need some help?" I called.

The men examined me for a moment, hard expressions on their faces. "No thanks," the one in back said.

But I was already out of my Model T and walking toward the back of the limo. When I reached the rear doors, I noticed that white sheets inside the car blocked the windows. Curious, I stopped and peeked behind a small opening between the sheets. Mounted inside the rear of the car was a pair of Thompson sub-machine guns.

I felt a hand on my back, pushing me firmly away from the window and toward the back of the vehicle. It was the man in the black suit and cap. He didn't say anything, but his expression was even harder than before.

I helped push the car back onto the road. Without a word, the man in the suit got into the limo's passenger seat and the two men drove off. It wasn't until I was back in my car and again on my way to school that I realized these men were gangsters, probably on their way from Chicago to Kansas City to fulfill a contract.

There were other technological advances in addition to automobiles. In 1916, radio pioneer David Sarnoff predicted that homes all over America would one day be equipped with radio music boxes that would tune in news, information, and entertainment sent out by wireless from central broadcasting points. His prophecy was realized in the early 1920s.

My father saw the potential of home radio and secured the exclusive distributorship for our region. We immediately had more customers than we could handle. I often went with my dad to set up a home radio, a two-hour task. Each radio was so heavy it took both of us to carry it.

As radios improved, a large, phonograph-like speaker was added. We used it in our store to hear the broadcast of the

## THE OTHER SIDE OF INFAMY

controversial “long count” heavyweight championship fight won by Gene Tunney over Jack Dempsey in 1927. We also listened to baseball’s World Series. In 1926 and 1928, we rooted for our St. Louis Cardinals, led by Rogers Hornsby and Dizzy Dean, to defeat the powerhouse New York Yankees, led by Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig (the Cardinals did win in ’26). Our favorite radio program, though, featured the entertaining escapades of Amos and Andy.

We did have skeptics in the neighborhood. One farmer insisted that nothing could come out of that box that had not been put in it. He went to his grave believing radio was a hoax and that there was a hidden record somewhere inside.

Through radio, we had far greater access to news of the world. I paid little attention, though, to reports of the creation of the Communist party in China in 1921, the establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1922, and increasing domestic problems in Japan. Like my elders and most Americans, I trusted our government to monitor these matters.

I had a good life. Most anything our family wanted was in stock at the store, and we simply took it off the shelf as needed. In those days before sales and income taxes, my father never kept books. If I needed a nickel, a dime, or even a quarter, I took one out of the money drawer.

Moreover, everything seemed possible in the Twenties. The nation was at peace and most people seemed to be making money. I enjoyed reading about the adventures of Lou Wetzel and Betty Zane in Zane Grey westerns and imagined myself as a cowboy. I also read Horatio Alger books. The Alger plots,

as I recall, were always similar: a country boy goes to the city; he meets a benefactor to whom he demonstrates the virtues of honesty, reliability, and hard work; he is rewarded with a good job and goes on to become a prominent citizen in the community. These stories built up in me a belief in myself and the idea that displaying such virtues would surely lead to success.

I don't know if it was the times, the Alger books, or something I inherited from my motivated father, but ambition began to bubble up within me. I was nine or ten and studying a civics book at school when I read that any American citizen could become president of the United States.

I thought, *Well, I'm a citizen. Why don't I run for it?*

In that moment, I set the presidency as my life goal. I would keep my eyes fixed on that prize for the next twelve years.

My growing ambition and self-confidence, perhaps combined with memories of my membership in the Spit and Argue Club, must have made me precocious. When I was twelve, I took an old wagon chassis and built a bed for it. During threshing season, when the farmers gathered the shocks in their huge wagons, I brought out my wagon and joined them. None of the other kids did that. The farmers seemed to appreciate my help and treated me almost as an equal.

Unlike my contemporaries, I often started conversations with my elders and attempted to relate to them as equals. Later, after I entered high school, I found myself conversing with Mr. Fred Spees, the principal, about history, philosophy, politics, and the war. I had a strong curiosity about life, the world, and how we all fit into it. Mr. Spees liked me and seemed to enjoy our discussions.

I regularly went to church, but my faith held little meaning for me. I only gave the appearance that high morals were important to me. I didn't want to do anything that would get me into trouble or put me in jail—not because I felt doing such things was wrong, but because I knew it would be bad for my reputation and hold me back from my goals. So, when friends began gambling money on our games of marbles, I quit. When some of my acquaintances smoked cigarettes and drank liquor, I stayed away from them.

By the time I achieved the age of sixteen, I thought the future for one James Willis Downing was very bright indeed. I even bragged about the fact that I expected one day to serve in the White House.

Then came September 1929. The US stock market began to wobble, exposing the nation's economic vulnerability. On October 24, the market lost 11 percent of its value at the opening bell. A rally briefly calmed some panicked investors, but then the market fell 13 percent on October 28 and another 12 percent on October 29—"Black Tuesday." These events were a spreading dark cloud that would have ominous implications for the nation and the world, eventually casting their shadow over famine, despair, opportunism, and finally, a return to war. They would also dramatically change the direction of my life, putting me on a course I had never imagined.

It was the beginning of the Great Depression.