



Text Version of Audio Story: Father Bill

He grew up on the mean streets of Chicago — Al Capone's neighborhood.

As a boy, Billy sat on the front porch of his house and watched the gangsters go by. Eliot Ness chased Scarface. Scarface chased Bugs Moran. The rat-a-tat-tat of Tommy guns could be heard everywhere. It was the roaring '20s. But, Billy wasn't about to get involved with gangs or crime. Billy went through seminary but was unable to return to Chicago as there were already too many priests in the Windy City. So, instead, he was sent to Le Center, Minnesota. Father Bill, as he was now called, didn't much care for parish life.

With the outbreak of World War II, he petitioned for release so as to serve as an Army chaplain. He was sent to the China Burma India Theater. He soon found that Army life suited him well, and after the war he stayed in the military as a chaplain with the Minnesota Army Reserve and the Minneapolis Veterans Hospital. He would eventually retire from the military in 1972 after 30 years of service to his country.

Everyone knows you don't become a chaplain for the money. Father Bill did it because, well, that was where he felt he was needed. Father Bill would live out his life making do, living in a tiny cabin he had bought back in 1948 for \$1,800 dollars in Prior Lake, Minnesota. It was there, in that small town, where the old priest was called on to say Mass every Monday morning for the parishioners of St. Mike's. For this little old Army chaplain with no relatives, the parishioners of St. Mike's would soon become his family. The old priest who wore tattered and thread-bare clothes received much kindness from townspeople.

When his washing machine broke, he decided he would simply wash his clothes by hand. But then, an angel of mercy would come to his aid. The local appliance dealer gave him a new washer. Father Bill was delighted with the gift. In another attempt to make ends meet, he used the wash water from his washing machine to scrub the floors of his tiny cabin. Father Bill tried everything he could think of to get by. He heated his soup in a can on the pilot light of his gas stove. It hardly seemed fair that a guy who gave of himself all his life was reduced to living such a hand-to-mouth existence.

It was almost a pitiful sight to see the poor old man well into his 80s fumbling through his coupons at the grocery store, saving a quarter here and 50 cents there. The kindness of others kept him going. Casseroles delivered to his tiny little cabin by nice church ladies would become the staple of his diet. He must have so appreciated that, a hot meal in such a lonely stomach.

Every week when he showed up to lead Monday morning Mass, he would bring a dozen or so of doughnuts to share with the girls in the church office. Maybe sometimes he would bring a loaf of banana nut bread. The doughnuts were usually a day old and starting to dry out a bit. They would've been on sale. It was something he could just afford, something he could share. He loved bringing them the doughnuts. And, if for no other reason, that made the ladies in the office appreciate them.

Father Bill passed on February 7, 2002. All those who had grown to love this simple man of meager means, all those who learned to accept this crusty old man just the way he was would show up to pay their last respects. Father Bill must have loved them too — his church family, his only family — for he left his entire estate to the church valued at 4.6 million dollars.

I'm the American Storyteller.