

EVERYBODY “HAS TA” KNOW

By Pam Rasmussen, International Ministries Office



Len and Elsie Gill’s young children stood outside three humble log cabins in a small jungle clearing and sang their hearts out – “Everybody has ta know.” Just beyond the edge of the *chaco* (shrub plains) and the crude airstrip, the Araona tribal people silently watched. Their presence had been detected by Lassie – the dog who guarded the missionary outpost.

The brown-skinned natives, still uncontacted by civilization, had no idea what these white children were singing or that they had put their own twist on the chorus “Everybody Ought To Know.” But Lenna and Laura knew why they were singing – they wanted the Araonas to know Jesus as their Savior. The youngsters had learned the



importance of the Great Commission from their parents, who had left their beloved home in the western USA to bring the Gospel to this remote people group in faraway eastern Bolivia.

Len Gill was born in 1937 in Billings, Montana. His folks owned a small farm where they raised two boys and three girls. Len’s dad had envisioned that his sons would one day run the homestead.

“I grew up in a Christian home,” Len said, “and I probably came to know Christ when I was around three. My spiritual growth continued.”

Almost 99 miles away, in Lewistown, Montana, Elsie Sullinger made her debut six months after Len, and was the oldest of three children. When she was eight, her family moved to Billings.

“I didn’t grow up in a Christian home,” Elsie confided. “When I was 16, I came to know the Lord on a street corner.”

The mailman had stopped beside her and engaged her in conversation, which led to presenting Elsie with the Gospel. Her heart was receptive. “The joy of salvation flooded my soul,” Elsie smiled.

The mailman then arranged for a church member to take Elsie to Sunday services, and it was in Sunday school that she first met Len. She took little notice of him because she had a boyfriend, but Len took notice of her. “She was a girl,” he chuckled. As time went on, his mild interest passed. “I had my mind set on being a missionary and she didn’t,” he stated.

Len and his older brother, Wayne, had made decisions close together to be missionaries, but it was at the end of a meeting held by New Tribes Mission (NTM) representative Ken Johnston that both men

publicly declared their desire. Wayne left shortly thereafter to begin his training with NTM. Len was still in school.

Elsie's attention was grabbed at church while watching Bruce Porterfield's presentation of the contact work with Bolivia's Nambiguara people. "The missionaries were trying to go up this narrow river to get to these Indians, and had their women and children with them," Elsie recalled. "The slide that I remember was of the women with dish pans up over their heads to protect them from limbs as well as from wasp nests. And the thought went through my mind, 'If the Lord could give those women the grace to do that to reach tribal people, He could do that for me, too.' I believe that is when I actually yielded my heart to be a missionary."

Elsie broke up with her boyfriend, and the fact that she now had the same goal in life as Len eventually drew them together.



"We talked about the Lord all the time," Len said. "That's the thing that drew me to her. She was just very young-in-the-Lord and eager to learn."

"We talked a lot about missions," Elsie chimed in.

They dated throughout high school. After Len graduated, he stayed around to help his father on the farm. Meanwhile, Elsie finished her Senior year and worked part time in a grocery store, earning enough money to put a down payment on a car to help her struggling, divorced mom. The two women agreed that Elsie could use the car to visit Len's family over weekends – a 16-mile trip on a dirt road up a 1,000-foot high plain.

When Elsie graduated from High school in May 1957, she and Len got engaged, then left for New Tribes Mission's Bible School that Fall.

Johnny Jasma, a nephew of the mailman who'd introduced Elsie to Christ, drove the couple to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. They even persuaded Johnny to stay on and study with them.

"The classes started in November and ended the first of October," Elsie said. But, when springtime came, Len left to assist his dad on the farm. "I felt I needed to help keep things stable back home, because Wayne was in Bolivia and I was the only son left in the States," Len explained.

In the interim, Johnny recorded the classes for Len. "I don't know how he did so much," Len said, "but I listened to them at home."

"Paul Burkart graduated Len without him being at the Bible school, because he'd kept up his studies," Elsie stated.

“After Bible School, I got back [to Billings] on a Sunday and the following Sunday we were married,” Elsie said.

“That was long enough,” Len laughed. “Then we went off to ‘Boot Camp’ [NTM’s practical missionary training] in Modesto, California.”

Len’s dad continued to keep the farm going, even though it was becoming a burden. “My father never once said, ‘You’re putting a knife to my back,’ like I’ve heard other testimonies of,” Len shared. “He said to his two sons, who he’d been waiting on to be farmers, ‘Go ahead and do what God would have you to do.’” However, Len and Elsie willingly interrupted their training once again to go back to Montana in the Spring, so that Len could help his dad. While there, Elsie gave birth to baby Lenna. Then, with the harvest completed, Len’s parents sold the farm and all that went with it. At the invitation of Ken Johnston, they moved to NTM’s Home Office in Woodworth, Wisconsin, where they served the Lord for six years.



“It was incredible to see my folks come into the mission,” Len said. “I could tell that it had to be of God, because, otherwise, Dad wouldn’t have moved away.”

Len and Elsie finished boot camp training and then a year of language school in Fredonia, Wisconsin. That’s where they welcomed another daughter, Laura, to their family.

Then it was time to discern where the Lord would have them serve overseas. Len didn’t want to go to Bolivia just because of Wayne. “If you were to go to a field because your brother was there, you’d come back home,” Len said. But he had a strong sense that Bolivia was where God wanted him and his family.

“So, on March 12, 1962, we went to Bolivia,” Elsie said. “My mother was very much against us going. She couldn’t figure out why we’d want to go to some foreign place when there were so many needy places in the States, where there were no lions, tigers, snakes and stuff like that to worry about. It was hard for her, but she eventually accepted it.” Three missionary terms later, Elsie’s mom became a Christian.

On the field, Len delved into language study. And Elsie gave birth to James. Their fourth child, another son, Loren, would follow 12 years later.

When asked by mission leaders where Gills preferred to work, their response was ““We’ll fit in wherever we can.” So, they were assigned to the Araona contact. “It sounded exciting!” Elsie said.

The first historical mention of the Araonas was in the early 1800s, penned by Franciscans Manuel Marcini and Fidel Codenach. Reportedly, the Araonas were originally the largest group in the region of *Colonia Nacional*, but their number was greatly diminished by the end of the 19th century. By then, the tribe was composed of only those who had escaped servitude to the rubber industry. In the early 60’s, missionaries from the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), while flying over, spotted the small group in a jungle clearing below. SIL asked New Tribes Mission if it would initiate a contact with those people. NTM would learn that there were only 37 Araonas.

Because Elsie had recently given birth, Len went alone to join Chuck and Elena Johnson and Harold Rainey at the contact site. Chuck and Harold, former Canadian loggers, had already built two, two-story cabins and had started a third. The small dwellings had an upstairs for sleeping and a downstairs for



eating. The men helped finish the one assigned to the Gills by adding a roof, and then Len built a staircase to the loft and installed a heavy front door and a solid window shutter, which could be lowered and locked from the inside. The latter two were necessary for safety should the natives become restless.

When James was six weeks old, Elsie arrived with him and his sisters. Such a rustic life was not as much of a shock to her as one might think. “Having grown up on a farm, we were used to using barn lanterns and the such,” she said. “But there was one thing that really did bother me – the sweat bees and wasps. We’d be trying to wash our clothes outside and we had a James Washer – a hand-washing machine. As I was cranking the clothes through the wringer, the bees loved to get under my arm pits and I’d get stung badly. That was hard. And



then I had to do all my cooking on a campfire-thing. We used a barrel, like we’d been taught to do in boot camp. It was a half a barrel lined with mud and the other half was put over the top. Another little barrel on the back was an oven.”

While the women maintained their quaint homes and provided meals for the menfolk, the fellows persevered to make a friendly contact with the Araonas. “We walked out so many meters and left gifts on a rack,” Len said. “We would leave things like machetes and small knives. We put out an axe only one time. We even put out tin cans because a tin can was very valuable to them. The Araonas would leave tiny drums on the rack and sticks that they used in their god-worship. This went on for about two years. Elena would watch through field glasses, but it was difficult to see the people, because they’d lift their chins, making it hard to spot a face [in the foliage]. The Johnson’s little dog barked when the Araonas were around. We’d then motion for the people to come close.”



“Finally, the time came when they did come out,” Elsie added. “They came early in the morning and stayed for quite a while. We couldn’t tell how many more were in the jungle. One guy stepped into the clearing and had a wooden axe. He was holding it over his head to show it and was putting out his hand like he wanted to have one like it. Chuck Johnson grabbed up a [metal] axe and took a couple of steps [forward]. The guy kept standing there. As Chuck got to the edge of the *chaco*, he chopped down a tall, thin tree, purposely felling it in the direction of the tribal man. Chuck advanced slowly, chopping on the fallen tree as he went. As he got closer, he offered the axe to the Araona, but the man motioned for Chuck to put it down. Chuck shook his head no and held the axe out like ‘Here, don’t you want it?’

“Chuck finally got close enough and the Araona stepped one foot forward and reached as far as he could,” Elsie elaborated. “Chuck took another step, held on to the real axe until he had his other hand on the wooden one, and then the exchange was made. The man took off running lickety-split with the prized axe in his hand. The next day, another guy came out and wanted an axe, too. They realized that we were willing to trade with them and that we wanted to be friends. That’s how the contact started,” Elsie explained.

However, there were still some tense occasions. “One time they surrounded us at night,” Elsie said. “They’d been out all day and, when the sun was setting, they wouldn’t leave. Our fellas motioned for them to [go], and they refused, so we knew they were up to something.”

The Araonas had the missionaries hemmed in on three sides, but the river was behind the houses and the natives were afraid of it.

“Len told me to go into the house and put the kids to bed and to go to bed myself,” Elsie said. “I locked the door, of course.” Len and the other two men kept guard.

The missionaries set off fireworks in attempt to get the Araonas to retreat, but it had no effect. Finally, they resorted to beaming a 12-volt flashlight on an Araona in the garden. He had one hand on a stalk of bananas and the other held a raised machete. “He streaked!” Len chuckled. For about an hour and a half, Len and his two colleagues shined the light in any direction they detected sound.

While all of this was occurring, Elsie was lying in bed in a state she described as ‘scared to pieces.’ “I didn’t know what was going to happen,” she said. “I was praying and the Lord reminded me of the verse in Psalms 34:7: *The angel of the Lord encampeth round about them that fear Him, and delivereth them.* And I just thought to myself, ‘Well, hey, God’s got His angels surrounding us!’ Peace came and I went right to sleep.” She slept so soundly that, after everything had settled down, Len had to climb the back wall to awaken her so she could go down and unlock the door.

Tower, on right, where the men guarded the outpost in the early days of the contact.



It took three years before the contact was firmly established, and that was only after the Araonas were comfortable about bringing their women into the open. The first time they brought them out, the men were huffing and blowing, chewing and spitting, and chanting. It was obvious they were frightened, so were endeavoring to protect themselves through witchcraft. “That was the day we saw demon possession,” Elsie said. “One man was just picked up and

thrown and rolled on the ground.” But, after that fearful day, the Araonas returned frequently and peaceably.

Other missionaries joined the Araona work, including a Wycliffe couple, who arrived to do linguistic analysis. Things were moving along well and the Gills left for furlough in the USA. While on home assignment, they received a letter from the mission’s leadership asking if they would consider assisting in another outreach – this time with the semi-civilized Chimané people, where missionaries Dean and Elaine Kempf were suddenly left laboring alone. A serious health issue had taken their partners out of the work. The Gills, pleased to serve wherever God led, quickly agreed. They were delighted when Harold Rainey and his bride were also reassigned to help. At that time, there were about 4,000 Chimanés.

Araona man gives Elsie a god-stick. (Culturally, only men were allowed to see it.)



“They dressed in long sack-like outfits made from a piece of cloth that they’d folded in half, sewed up the sides and cut a hole in the middle for their heads to go through,” Elsie explained. “The men had a V-neck and the women had a round neckline.”

There was much to learn that was different. Gills had to begin all over again with language study. “It was a little difficult because we had to force ourselves to forget the Araona language,” Elsie said.

Len was quick to add that the Kempfs took him and Elsie under their wings and greatly helped them get established in the ministry there. The Gills’ role was to help Kempfs with church planting, which was



Len teaching a Bible class.

already well underway. Bible teaching and literacy were a large part of it, as well as training school teachers.

“We were in the Chimané work probably 10 years before my brother, Wayne, came on the team,” Len said. “He worked on Bible translation for 18 years.” The brothers marveled how God had moved them individually from a farm in Montana to eventually work together, almost two

decades later, in the same tribe in the jungles of Bolivia.

Outreach to the Chimanés continued to grow as did river travel. The Gills and the Raineys began expanding the Gospel’s reach. “The Raineys took the lower portion and we took the higher portion of the river,” Len explained. The Kempfs had recorded some messages which their coworkers used as a springboard in sharing God’s plan of salvation.

Initially, the missionaries used dug-out canoes for travel, stopping to cook under the hot sun and to sleep on a beach. Then God provided an outboard motor!

On one of the trips, Len steered the boat away from the bank and was backing up when the foot of the motor caught on a submerged limb, tipping the boat so much that everyone and everything fell into the water. Heavy items sank immediately – ammo boxes containing fragile items such as camera equipment; a fold-up table and benches; a shotgun, axes and machetes. The Gills’ mattress – tightly rolled and covered with plastic – and the wooden, foam-lined box housing the radio transmitter stayed afloat. The tribal people, who’d been standing along the bank to see the missionaries off, jumped into the river to

try to salvage things. Len, who couldn't swim well, made it to shore. Elsie, who was a good swimmer, spied their mattress floating away, and went after it. She held onto it tightly as the swift current washed her downriver and around the bend, where she made it safely to a sandbar.

"I was waiting on the beach for someone to come by," Elsie said. Len, on the other hand, was agonizing over the fact that the last time he'd seen her was as she neared the bend, where he knew the bank was caving into the water. He feared the worst and took off running to the lower end of the village where the Kempfs lived.

The Kempfs, in turn, radioed the school for missionary kids to let them know what was happening. It was thought that Elsie had possibly drowned, but the staff decided to wait in telling the three older Gill children anything.

Len raced back up the trail and Dean Kempf jumped into a boat to pull things out of the river as they floated by. Then he spied Elsie with her mattress on the sandbar. He yelled to her in relief and made his way to the beach. Throwing his arms around her, he expressed joy that she was alive. "He told me that Len thought that I was dead, and then I was all concerned about him," Elsie said.

Once back together in the village, the missionaries began to lay out their sopping-wet belongings to dry. "We lost a lot of things," Elsie said, "but it was amazing how much was left. There was another wooden suitcase that had medicines in it, and somebody had been able to grab that before it got away. I remember, when we tipped over, I could hear the people calling out from the bank, 'Oh, the Señora's in the water! She's drowning! Oh, the medicine! It's all going to be lost!'



"We dried everything in two or three days, packed up again and took off upriver. There were more people who came to the Lord on that trip than at any other time!" Elsie said enthusiastically. "If we had just given up, we would have missed all of that. But the Lord intended to give us a harvest of souls on that trip. Satan had really fought against it!"

The Gills spent 46 years in

Bolivia, and today there are many thriving churches among the Chimanés. Len and Elsie have lived at the mission's retirement homes in Sanford, Florida for the past 10 years.

When asked how they would advise a young person considering missions today, Elsie was quick to answer. "Do it! Definitely! Oh my, YES!" she exclaimed. Len smiled in agreement. Why? 'Cause everybody has ta know!



THE GILL FAMILY TODAY

Left to right

Elsie, Laura, James, Lenna, Loren and Len



NOTE: Today, New Tribes Mission is called Ethnos360