

El McMeen didn't start so well. He nearly died at birth. He has cerebral palsy. He had a broken home. He was a "miscreant" (his word). But his story is one of redemption. He became a "Wall Street Lawyer," an internationally acclaimed guitarist, and a Christian minister, with a wife, four children, and three grandchildren.

Growing Up in God's Country: **A Memoir** by El McMeen

Order the complete book from the publisher
[Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10019.html?s=pdf>
or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.

A MEMOIR

Growing Up in God's Country

FROM SMALL-TOWN, USA TO NEW YORK CITY,
AND BACK

El McMeen

Copyright © 2018 El McMeen

PAPERBACK ISBN: 978-1-64438-014-7

HARDCOVER ISBN: 978-1-64438-289-9

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Published by BookLocker.com, Inc., St. Petersburg, Florida.

Printed on acid-free paper.

BookLocker.com, Inc.

2018

First Edition

All Scriptural quotations were taken from the New King James Version ®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Table of Contents

Foreword	vii
1 Lewistown, PA	1
2 - Irish Jigs in Central PA	7
3 - Double Double, Toil and Trouble.....	13
4 - God and Church in Lewistown	23
5 - Music in Lewistown.....	25
6 - Family	29
7 - Spiritual Intermission I	37
8 - Huntingdon, PA.....	41
9 - Getting Along.....	45
10 - My Career in Media: Paperboy.....	49
11 - High School.....	53
12 - Music in Huntingdon	59
13 - God and Church in Huntingdon.....	63
14 - Decision Time	67
15 - “D.L. Moody’s School”	71
16 - Harvard? Really?.....	81
17 - Harvard. Really.	85
18 - Music at Harvard	97
19 - God and Church at Harvard.....	103
20 - Law School.....	107
21 - Penn Law School	111
22 - Sheila Ann Taenzler.....	119

El McMeen

23 - Philly to New York	125
24 - NYC	127
25 - Brooklyn	131
26 - Music; Plateau	135
27 - Mountain Lakes, NJ	137
28 - Cravath, Swaine & Moore, Esquires	143
29 - Mountain Lakes Redux	153
30 - Spiritual Intermission II: Was God in NJ and NY?	159
31 - Cravats, and Beef and Lamb	161
32 - Cabbages and Kings, Semicolons and Wings	169
33 - Music in the 1980's: El as Troubadour.....	179
34 - Music in the 1980's: El as Guitar-Picker	183
35 - More God-at-Work: Jim Ensor.....	195
36 - Sparta (NJ, Not the Greek One).....	199
37 - "There's Something Happening Here"	203
38 - Sister Franny.....	211
39 - What Now?.....	217
40 - Rolling Down the Tracts	221
41 - For the Struggling Christian: Reclaim Your Identity.....	227
42 - Are We Sure That We Are Right With God?	233
43 - Unforgiveness: A Christian Guide to Tearing Down That Wall.....	237
44 - God Likes Thumb Picks: Rev. Tony Loeffler and the Solid Rock Evangelistic Association.....	243
45 - Ministry in Newton: Towers and Waters.....	247
46 - "There's Something Strange, In the Neighborhood"	255
47 - Sparta, NJ to Huntingdon, PA?.....	269

Growing Up in God's Country

48 - Indeed, Sparta to Huntingdon!.....	273
49 - Back to Sparta	281

1

Lewistown, PA

In 2006 I called my mother. She was 92 and bedridden, but still sharp. “Guess where I am,” I bellowed into the cellphone. “I don’t know, Sandy. I’ll bite!” I continued yelling. “I’m at the Lewistown Hospital, looking at the room where you gave birth to me on June 3, 1947!”

I lied. I didn’t really know where the delivery room was. I was, however, in the parking lot looking at that medical monolith on Electric Avenue, Lewistown, central PA, USA, Planet Earth.

We had a laugh over this, and went on to have a good visit at her home in Huntingdon, PA. It was to be our next-to-last time together. In 2007 she died. (Parenthetically, she hated the term “passed away.” “Just say ‘died,’” she would command.)

My nickname was Sandy. Anyone who knew me before age 16 calls me Sandy. It’s only with an effort that they can say “El.” I’ll always be Sandy to them. The name apparently related to my blond hair. In later life my mother confessed the real reason: I had been conceived at the seashore. I can’t verify that claim from date books, but must admit that my parents did visit Atlantic City in the relevant period. I guess they didn’t spend all their time on the beach or at Steel Pier. My mother also asserted categorically that my sister had been ten months in utero, darkly implying that

Franny was somehow complicit in her delayed birth. Mother's friends pooh-poohed that, but Mother was a smart Cornell grad, and after all, it was her uterus.

We from Lewistown are the few, the proud, and in certain cases (although not mine) actually Marines. The population in Lewistown when I was born was 13,000, give or take. It was and is the County Seat of Mifflin County. As a result perhaps of declining industry, the population now consists of 8,000 or so stalwarts.

We natives of Lewistown are diverse but have two common battles. One is to convince people that the town is actually Lewistown, and not Lewisburg, where Bucknell University is located. "Oh, yes, Lewistown; I have a friend who goes to Bucknell!" One feels like a soul-crusher to have to correct such an enthusiast.

The other challenge -- all right, these are not "challenges" like Iwo Jima or world peace. The other issue is to indicate that it's not Lewiston, as in Maine. It's "Lewistown," with a "w." Of course, by now, people have lost interest and are checking for text messages on their smartphones.

We from central PA tend to have some speech eccentricities. We may say "ontil" for "until," or "gawn" for "going." We may refer to you and your ilk as "youns," pronounced "yunz," with one syllable. We may say "the car needs fixed" instead of "the car needs to be fixed." (My wife Sheila likes to pounce on that one. I have tried to defend it, unsuccessfully.)

Growing Up in God's Country

There are sometimes peculiar, local meanings to otherwise innocent words. If a fellow student in elementary school calls you “ignorant” (pronounced “ignernt”), that doesn’t mean you are lacking knowledge but that you have a “dirty mind.”

My mother had to admonish me regularly about “dropping my g’s” when I would say “dew-un” rather than “do-ing.” She was heard to say “iggle” for “eagle” more than once, so she wasn’t clear of the local influence. In fact, she was nailed at Cornell for being from central Pennsylvania. One of her English professors was William Strunk, Jr., the original author of the iconic grammar book The Elements of Style. E.B. White would later expand the book greatly and add his imprimatur to it.

Strunk had the skill and reputation of being able to tell students where they were from after listening to them talk. Mother was up, and after she uttered a few words, Strunk pronounced that she lived within 35 miles of State College, PA! He was right, of course, almost to the mile. If we central PA types think that other people talk funny, well, we need to remember Strunk and Biddle (my mother’s maiden name).

Back to the hospital. In later years I visited the hospital to distribute some of my Christian tracts in waiting rooms. I noticed a plaque with the names of the Presidents of the Hospital Auxiliary over the years. My mother Josephine served from 1950-52. She was listed as “Mrs. Elmer E. McMeen.” I was going to engage in some grandiose societal analysis regarding men, women, and names back then, but quickly noticed that other women used their first names

rather than their husbands' names, so whatever theory I might have had was wrecked.

Moving on. Lewistown was a great town in which to be a kid. It was, to be sure, cold in the winter, hot and humid in the summer, and oddly lacking in trees in various parts of downtown, giving those areas somewhat of a bleached look in the summer heat. A central square and monument graced the town. There were lots of theaters, cozy restaurants, great bike-riding places, teaberry ice cream, the river, and the Panthers as the high school football team (now the Mifflin County Huskies).

Most importantly, perhaps, for us 11-year-olds back then, there were various surreptitious places to smoke cigarettes pilfered from one's parents. If you wanted to be brazen and smoke out in the open, the graveyard by the high school was perfect. It was kind of spooky, and, of course, the residents didn't mind.

But I get ahead of myself. We need to return to the hospital. On June 3, 1947, there was a problem. I was born, to be sure, but when I emerged, the umbilical cord was wrapped around my neck four times, tightly. If I had not been born breech, I simply would not have survived. How do I know? The doctors said so.

Years later, as I would try to visualize that whole scene, I felt the Lord showing me, graphically, His hand in my mother's womb, gently turning me around 180 degrees so that I would exit rear-end first. You may say I have a vivid imagination, but I've had that vision several times. You may say I give undue credit to the Lord. I say, better that than the converse.

Growing Up in God's Country

I was alive, but all was not well. I weighed in at 5 pounds, 3 ounces. My mother liked to tell people that I looked like a “picked chicken” and that it took many months for me to become “presentable.”

But puniness was not the major problem. The cord had cut off oxygen to parts of my brain that control motor functions. The result was cerebral palsy. It was considered a “mild case,” but it left me with coordination and stamina problems and, as I was to find out decades later, weakness on my left side, from the eye all the way down to the leg.

In 1953 our family doctor, Dr. John Hunter, consulted a Philadelphia physician, Dr. Frederic Leavitt, about me. (Dr. Leavitt’s office on Pine Street in Philly was only a few blocks from the place where I was to live during my first term at Penn Law School 16 years later.)

Dr. Leavitt’s letter states in part as follows:

“Mrs. McMeen brought Ellsworth to my office June 30, 1953. This little fellow is a case of ‘cerebral palsy’ - so called. He is really a case of retardation of cerebral brain stem and cerebellar development as a result of severe and constant anoxia due to interference with the blood supply of the brain prior to birth - due to the fact that the umbilical cord was apparently tightly constricting the neck for some time prior to his birth. [*Note from EL: I guess lawyers aren’t the only ones guilty of long sentences and big words.*] It was fortunate that he was delivered by breech instead of head presentation, because had it been the usual procedure he undoubtedly would have died at birth. Also, fortunately, the boy is not epileptic as many of these children tend to be nor is he particularly intellectually retarded.”

My children and I have mused together about the significance of the word “particularly” in the last sentence of the quote. “Dad, does that mean you are ‘generally’ retarded?” Of course, the term “retarded” has gone out of fashion, but the joke was still good.

In the 1980’s my mother sent me an article from the New York Times magazine that addressed the matter of so-called “mild” cases of cerebral palsy. The article concluded that there was no such thing. CP is CP. My mother agreed, and wrote the author of that article confirming his conclusions.

As mentioned, my nickname growing up was “Sandy.” When I hit age 16, my mother suggested that “Sandy” was for kids, and “El” might be a better name. Maybe she was right, but I do have friends and contemporaries, like guitarist and educator Alexander (“Sandy”) Shalk, who at least seem to be adults. That having been said, let’s take a pause from names-and-games in Lewistown to look further at Sandy’s “problem.”

2

Irish Jigs in Central PA

As I now, in my early dotage, reflect on the physical problems of my youth, I praise the Lord that smartphones didn't exist back then. It might well have crushed my spirit to see how awkward and shaky I was on my feet. We have some family videos from the 1950's, and it's painful for me to watch myself in those. There is one series of moving pictures from the mid-1950's when I am staggering around, my sister barely touches me, and I fall down. At least I got up again.

Nobody really knew the precise extent of the problem back then, other than issues of "coordination" and "stamina." What I clearly discern now is a weakness in my back and in my left side. The way I compensated back then was to hold my shoulders way back, walking a bit like a tipsy penguin. When I'd get tired, I would kind of hop. Now I realize I did that to avoid falling down when my left leg would otherwise have given way.

My friends didn't make fun of me. That was a great blessing. When I would get tired in walking to school, I'd simply sit down on the sidewalk, rest, and then proceed. If I wasn't feeling well, there were a lot of rests in that "journey" from our home at 793 South Main Street (which now is 723 South Main Street) to Seventh Ward Elementary School (which now is a parking lot).

I do remember a few times at home when it was really bad, and I would have to crawl to get from my bedroom to the bathroom. One reason I have a strong memory of the tile in that bathroom was undoubtedly my proximity to it after crawling back and forth a few times.

I'm not whining, just describing. To prove that, I can tell you what was on the radio one particular time I had that problem. It was the song "The Twist." Before you utter the heretical name "Chubby Checker," the version I was hearing over and over was the original version by Hank Ballard, in 1959! I was 12.

I feel bad for my father Elmer, who I think just couldn't process the fact that his son was kind of gimpy. He had played football for Harrisburg Academy in his high-school days, and was a big, strong guy. He was affectionate toward me, mind you, but was of the school that encouragement/commands to walk straight might have the desired effect. Alas, they didn't.

My mother had also been an athlete. She played on the women's varsity basketball team at Huntingdon High School, in the Class of 1932. She loved hiking, too, and even late in life she was a mainstay of the "Thousand-Hills Hikers" in Huntingdon County, PA.

Back to me. At the suggestion of some friends, Mother once took me for "patterning." It wasn't some ominous mind-control thing, but was an attempt to try to "teach" my muscles to work right by a type of repetitive action. I remember pulling my legs up and down and back and forth over and over in a rather dark second-floor room somewhere

in Lewistown. The professionals really tried to help me, but my muscles were not very good students.

Also frustrating my father and my mother was the matter of trousers. I kept falling down and tearing them at the knees. It seemed that I was doing a lot of rolling on the ground at a time when my parents weren't rolling in the dough. After that kept happening, my mother discovered patches, and I became the kid with patches on his pants. It was embarrassing, and I wasn't mature or smart enough to start a sartorial trend by acting as if patches were cool.

My friends at Seventh Ward School were great. They knew I had a problem and really appreciated my efforts to do the physical activities we were called on to do.

In Mr. Gordon Singer's gym class one term, our challenge was to learn the Irish jig, in a number of different step combinations. There were five or six, as I recall. We all persevered in stepping, kicking, and turning until the fateful day when we had to do them all together – a final exam, if you will. At my turn, I launched into my version of the dance, in all its variations, which may well have looked like an extra-terrestrial trying to learn the ways of the human. At the end I got a great round of applause from the other kids. I still remember and appreciate that, over 60 years later.

As I grew older, some of the overt physical manifestations of my problem diminished. In college and law school, I wasn't really hampered that much. Earlier, in secondary school at Mt. Hermon School (now Northfield Mt. Hermon School), the problem had reversed. There the gym teacher couldn't understand that I even had a physical

problem because I looked somewhat normal, if uncoordinated.

Well, I really did have a problem. It came out in full bloom on the infamous “Mountain Day.” On that day, as a supposed gift to the Seniors, classes were called off and we Seniors would have the “great fun” of climbing Mt. Monadnock in New Hampshire. I, of course, was hoping (I hadn’t yet discovered real praying) that it would get cancelled or forgotten. It wasn’t. After the bus ride to NH, I struggled up to or near the top, and then had to be carried down by one of the saintly teachers, whose name I have sadly forgotten. Interestingly enough, even though I felt humiliated, nobody commented or criticized, and the teacher acted as if that kind of thing happened every day. God bless them for that.

As I look back on my life, I realize that my physical problems have always been front-and-center. I have to, or feel I have to, address in advance the physical demands or risks of every situation and assess whether I can walk somewhere, climb stairs, have energy, keep up with people, all with anxiety about a possible physical collapse and embarrassment. In giving an account in Heaven before the Lord, would I have to stand or could I sit down -- even wacky thoughts like that. (On that one, my faith tells me there won’t be a problem.)

I realize that my physical issues have made me somewhat solitary, avoiding certain types of group activities. (“What if they want to walk somewhere, and I can’t make it?”) When I want to exercise, I may take a walk alone, often in the dark with just a flashlight. I usually avoid attending football games. I had a collapse one time at

the then Giants Stadium in NJ. My friend Paul Koepff, who was with me, graciously brought his car into the stadium to pick me up.

There were some moments of triumph amidst the physical struggles. I must share one, since it was a favorite of my mother's.

I played on a Seventh Ward Elementary School basketball team. I was on the team probably by designation rather than by anyone's choice. I had a very difficult time shooting with two hands, but, for some reason, I was able to shoot a basketball by throwing it like a baseball with my right hand. It looked weird, but after hours of practice at our garage hoop on South Main Street I actually got kind of good at it.

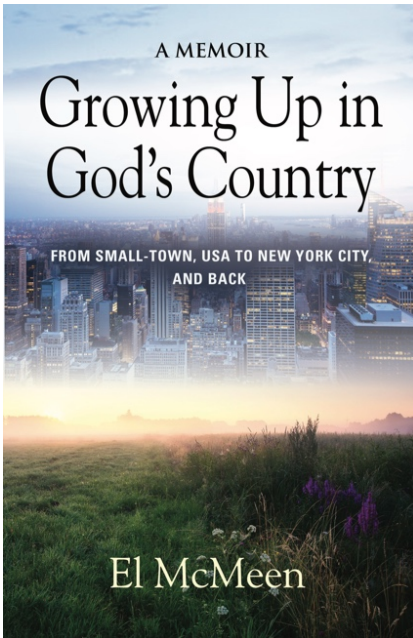
Our team was having an "away" game at the Buchanan Elementary School on the West side of town. During the game, a lady near my mother commented on the little boy out there who couldn't seem to run or do anything right. My mother drew herself up in righteous indignation and declared, "That is my son!" Man, she was loyal.

Anyway, near the end of the game, someone passed me the ball and I heaved it up from beyond the foul line. It went in, all net! The crowd burst into applause.

Over the years, that game and my performance have passed into McMeen legend. My mother would assert that "Sandy won the game with a shot from half-court!" The truth is that if I hadn't made that shot, we would have lost to Barry Reinard's team 23-4. My thrilling shot brought the score to 23-6. Still, I had my moment on the court. And, hey,

if the three-point rule had been in effect, it might have been 23-7!

I tee all this up to give perspective and context to the amazing things the Lord has done for me. He took this gimpy kid and gave him a life as a husband, father, grandfather, corporate lawyer in the cauldron of New York City, then as a touring and recording fingerstyle guitarist, and later as a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Those were miracles. I know. I was there.



El McMeen didn't start so well. He nearly died at birth. He has cerebral palsy. He had a broken home. He was a "miscreant" (his word). But his story is one of redemption. He became a "Wall Street Lawyer," an internationally acclaimed guitarist, and a Christian minister, with a wife, four children, and three grandchildren.

Growing Up in God's Country: **A Memoir** by El McMeen

Order the complete book from the publisher
[Booklocker.com](https://www.booklocker.com)

<https://www.booklocker.com/p/books/10019.html?s=pdf>
or from your favorite neighborhood
or online bookstore.