

## **MY LIFE**

### **SANKEY'S STORY OF HIS OWN LIFE**

by Ira D. Sankey

Copyright © 1907

#### **Chapter 1**

##### **BEGINNING OF MINISTRY TO THE CHICAGO FIRE**

I was born in the village of Edinburg, on the Mahoning River in Western Pennsylvania, August 28, 1840.

The first hymn I remember having heard was from the lips of my beloved mother, when, as a child, she sang me to sleep with the strains of that sweet old hymn:

"Hush, my dear, lie still and slumber,  
Holy angels guard thy bed."

As a boy, it was one of my chief joys to meet with other members of our family around the great log fire in the old homestead, and spend the long winter evenings singing with them the good old hymns and tunes of the church, which was the only music we had in those days. When at home, my father would frequently join us in these evenings of sacred song, singing a splendid bass, while other members of the family carried the other parts. In this way I learned to read music, and when I was about eight years old I could sing correctly such tunes as St. Martin's, Belmont, Coronation, etc.

The church to which I belonged was situated several miles from our home, but my fondness for singing led me to be a regular attendant.

I received the usual school privileges which fell to the lot of boys and girls of those days. The very first recollection I have of anything pertaining to a holy life was in connection with a Mr. Frazer. I recall how he took me by the hand and led me with his own children to the Sunday-school held in the old schoolhouse. I shall remember this to my dying day. He had a warm heart and the children all loved him. It was not until some years after that I was converted, at the age of sixteen, while attending revival meetings at a church known as The King's Chapel, about three miles from my home, but my first impressions were received from that man when I was very young.

In 1857 our family removed to Newcastle, where my father assumed the presidency of the bank. Here I attended the high school, where every opportunity was given to study such of the higher branches as the student might have a taste for, and later I took a position in the bank. On arriving at Newcastle I joined the Methodist Episcopal Church. Soon I was elected superintendent of the Sunday-school and leader of the choir.

When I first took charge of the singing it was thought by many of the church members that the use of an organ, or any kind of musical instrument to accompany the voices of the singers, was wicked and worldly. The twanging of an old tuning-fork on the back of a hymn-book was not objected to, nor the running of the whole gamut in subdued voice to find the proper key, nor the choir trying to get the proper note to their respective parts in the never-to-be forgotten, "Do, Mi, Sol, Mi, Do," before beginning the hymn.

For several years we kept on in this way, but by and by we found that the majority were in favor of having an organ in the choir. I shall never forget the day on which the organ was first introduced. I had the honor of presiding at the instrument, and I remember well how carefully I played the opening piece. Only one or two of the old members left the church during the singing. It was reported that an old man who left the church on account of the introduction of the organ, was seen on his dray the next day, driving through the main street of the town, seated on the top of a large casket of rum, singing at the top of his voice:

"A charge to keep I have," etc.

It was here that I began to make special use of my voice in song, and in this way, though unconsciously, I was making preparation for the work in which I was to spend my life.

When about twenty years of age I went to Farmingtown, Ohio, to attend a musical convention, conducted by Mr. Bradbury. On my return home, my father said to mother: "I am afraid that boy will never amount to anything; all he does is to run about the country with a hymn-book under his arm." Mother replied that she would rather see me with a hymn-book under my arm than with a whisky bottle in my pocket.

In the spring of 1860, on the call of President Lincoln for men to sustain the Government, I was among the first in Newcastle to have my name enrolled as a soldier. My company was sent to Maryland. Religious services were held in the camp, and I often led the singing. I soon found several other young men who could render the same service.

In a short time the people around us also learned that there were some singers in the Union camp, and we were frequently invited out by families who had heard of the singing of the "boys in blue."

I remember with what astonishment the Southern people heard some of our soldier boys play the piano in their beautiful homes. The singing of some of the old-time "home songs" seemed to dispel all feeling of enmity. We were always treated with the utmost hospitality and kindness, and many friendships were formed that lasted until long after the war was ended. I organized a male choir in the company to which I belonged, and we would frequently be called upon to assist the chaplain in conducting the religious services of the camp.

At the expiration of my term as a soldier I did not re-enter the army, but returned to Newcastle to assist my father, who had been appointed by Abraham Lincoln as a collector of internal revenue.

In 1863, on the 9th of September, I married a member of my choir — Miss Fanny V. Edwards, a daughter of the Hon. John Edwards. She has been a blessing and a helpmate to me throughout my life and in all my work.

My services as a singer were utilized in Western Pennsylvania and Eastern Ohio for Sunday-school conventions and political gatherings.

In 1867, when I was twenty-seven years old, a branch of the Young Men's Christian Association was organized at Newcastle, of which I was at that time elected secretary and later president. The first meetings were held in a small hired room. From that modest beginning, by the help of GOD, I was later enabled to give to the city a Young Men's Christian Association building, including gymnasium, library and bathrooms, in all costing more than \$40,000, by means of money realized from the sale of "Gospel Hymns."

Not far from this building, on Jefferson street, I bought a beautiful lot for my old church, on which to erect a new structure, and later I assisted Bishop Vincent to raise the necessary funds, so that the new church was dedicated without any debt. My father and mother were members of this church until they passed away.

In 1870, with two or three others, I was appointed a delegate to the International Convention of the Association, to be held at Indianapolis that year.

For several years I had read in the religious press about Mr. Moody, and I was therefore pleased when I learned that he would be at the convention, being a delegate from the Chicago Association. For a couple of days I was disappointed in neither seeing nor hearing him. At several of the annual conventions prior to this occasion, it had been the custom to select Moody as chairman, but now it was decided that some one else should occupy the chair, and Moody therefore took a seat among the other delegates on the floor.

However, late on a Saturday afternoon, it was announced that Moody of Chicago would lead a six o'clock morning prayer-meeting in the Baptist Church. I was rather late, and therefore sat down near the door with a Presbyterian minister, Robert McMillan, a delegate from my own county, who said to me, "Mr. Sankey, the singing here has been abominable; I wish you would start up something when that man stops praying, if he ever does." I promised to do so, and when opportunity offered I started the familiar hymn, "*There is a fountain filled with blood.*" The congregation joined heartily and a brighter aspect seemed to be given to the meeting.

At the conclusion of the meeting Mr. McMillan said to me: "Let me introduce you to Mr. Moody."

We joined the little procession of persons who were going up to shake hands with him, and thus I met for the first time the man with whom, in the providence of GOD, I was to be associated for the remainder of his life, or nearly thirty years.

Moody's first words to me, after my introduction, were, "Where are you from? Are you married? What is your business?" Upon telling him that I lived in Pennsylvania, was married, had two children, and was in the government employ, he said abruptly, "You will have to give that up."

I stood amazed, at a loss to understand why the man told me that I would have to give up what I considered a good position. "What for?" I exclaimed.

"To come to Chicago and help me in my work," was the answer.

When I told him that I could not leave my business, he retorted, "You must; I have been looking for you for the last eight years."

I answered that I would think the matter over; but as yet I had no thought of giving up my position.

He told me about his religious work in Chicago, and closed by saying that the greatest trouble in connection with his meetings was the matter of the singing. He said he could not sing himself, and therefore had to depend upon all kinds of people to lead his service of song, and that sometimes when he had talked to a crowd of people, and was about to "pull the net," some one would strike up a long meter hymn to a short meter tune, and thereby upset the whole meeting.

Mr. Moody then asked me if I would go with him and pray over the matter, and to this I consented - out of politeness. After the prayer we parted, and I returned to my room, much impressed by Mr. Moody's prayer, but still undecided.

The next day I received a card from Mr. Moody asking if I would meet him on a certain street corner that evening at six o'clock. At that hour I was at the place named, with a few of my friends. In a few minutes Moody came along.

Without stopping to speak, he passed on into a store near by, and asked permission to use a large store-box. The permission was granted; he rolled the box into the street, and, calling me aside, asked me to get up on the box and sing something.

"*Am I a soldier of the cross?*" soon gathered a considerable crowd. After the song, Mr. Moody climbed up on the box and began to talk. The workingmen were just going home from the mills and the factories, and in a short time a very large crowd had gathered. The people stood spellbound as the words fell from Moody's lips with wonderful force and rapidity.

When he had spoken for some twenty-five minutes he announced that the meeting would be continued at the Opera House, and invited the people to accompany us there. He asked me to lead the way and with my friends sing some familiar hymn. This we did, singing as we marched down the street, "*Shall we gather at the river.*" The men with the dinner pails followed closely on our heels instead of going home, so completely were they carried away by the sermon from the store-box.

The Opera House was packed to the doors, and Moody first saw that all the workingmen were seated before he ascended to the platform to speak. His second address was as captivating as the one delivered on the street corner, and it was not until the delegates had arrived for the evening session of the convention that Mr. Moody closed the meeting, saying, "Now we must close, as the brethren of the convention wish to come in to discuss the question, 'How to reach the masses.'"

Here was a man who could successfully reach the masses while others were talking about it.

When Mr. Moody again brought up the question of our going into the work together, I was still

undecided. After a delay of over six months, and much urging on Mr. Moody's part, I consented to spend a week with him.

I arrived in Chicago one bright morning about daylight, and after a hasty breakfast proceeded at once to Mr. Moody's home, on the north side of the city. Immediately on entering the house, and without any preliminaries or introductions to such members of his family as were present, he asked me if I would not sit down at the organ and lead the singing for the family devotions.

After the services were over and I had been introduced to his family, he said: "I am going to spend the day in visiting a lot of sick people, and I want you to go with me and sing for them." In the first home we visited we found a sick mother with a very large family, who were all very glad to see Mr. Moody, who at once took a seat by the bedside, saying: "I am going to read a few words from the Bible, but first I want my friend, Sankey, to sing a little hymn for you." I sang "*Scatter Seeds of Kindness*," which was quite popular in those days.

This hymn, which was the first one I sang for Moody, on joining him in Chicago, in 1871, was the last one I sang for him, twenty-eight years later. This was at the last public meeting we held together, which was in Brooklyn, in the church of Richard M. Storrs, D.D., in September, 1899.

Besides visiting the sick, we spent the week in holding a number of meetings in the Illinois Street Church, of which Moody was the founder and leader, noon prayer-meetings in the business part of the city, some evangelistic services in different churches, and concluded the week with a mass meeting in Farwell Hall.

This meeting he opened with a congregational hymn, and while it was being sung, he said to me: "I am going to speak on 'The Prodigal Son,' and I want you to sing one of the songs I heard you sing at Indianapolis, '*Come home, O prodigal child*.'"

I replied: "But I have no organ with which to accompany myself."

Pointing his finger over his shoulder at the great three thousand dollar organ at the rear of the platform, he said: "Isn't that enough for you?"

I replied that it was too large, and too far away, and that if I used it, I would have to turn my back to the audience while singing, and that the song so rendered would not amount to anything, nor did I think that the German gentleman who had been playing the organ could accompany me in the way in which I should like to render the hymn.

Moody then said: "Give him a book, and tell him how you want it played." This I did. Later on when Moody suddenly finished his address, which was one of great power, he looked at me and said: "Mr. Sankey will now sing a solo for us, and let it be perfectly still while he sings."

I arose quickly, and turned around to indicate to the organist that I was ready, but to my horror, he had not yet returned from the quiet smoke which he was in the habit of enjoying in a back room while Moody was preaching. I stepped to the front of the platform and sang the song as best I could without any musical accompaniment. I have always remembered that song, as being the first sacred solo sung by me in one of Mr. Moody's large evangelistic meetings.

As I was about to leave the city for my home the next morning, Mr. Moody said: "You see that I was right; your singing has been very helpful in all the meetings, and I am sure you ought to come to Chicago at once, and give up your business."

When arriving home, I consulted my pastor, rather hoping that he would advise me not to go, but when he, as well as all my friends, was of the opinion that it was my plain duty to go, I sent my resignation to Mr. Hugh McCullough, at that time Secretary of the Treasury, and the position which I had held was, at my request, given to a "bucktail" soldier who had escaped from Libby Prison.

We thus commenced work together in Chicago in the early part of 1871, singing and praying with the sick, speaking and singing at the daily noon prayer-meetings, and other work, until Mr. Moody's church was destroyed in the Chicago fire.

Sunday evening, October 8, 1871, we were holding a meeting in Farwell Hall, which was crowded to the doors. At the close of his address Mr. Moody asked me to sing a solo, and standing by the great organ at the rear of the platform I began the old, familiar hymn, "*To-day the Saviour calls.*" By the time I had reached the third verse,

"To-day the Saviour calls:  
For refuge fly;  
The storm of justice falls,  
And death is nigh,"

my voice was drowned by the loud noise of the fire engines rushing past the hall, and the tolling of bells, among which we could hear, ever and anon, the deep, sullen tones of the great city bell, in the steeple of the old court-house close at hand, ringing out a general alarm.

Tremendous confusion was heard in the streets, and Mr. Moody decided to close the meeting at once, for the audience was becoming restless and alarmed.

As the people dispersed, I went with Mr. Moody down the small back stairway leading into the old Arcade Court, and from our position there we watched the reflection of the fire, half a mile away, on the west side of the city, as it cast its ominous glare against the sky. After a few moments we separated, I to go over the river to where the fire was raging, and he to his home on the North Side. We did not meet again for more than two months.

On reaching the scene of the fire I found a whole block of small frame buildings burning fiercely, and I assisted in tearing down some board fences, to try to keep the fire from spreading to the adjoining territory.

While thus engaged, the wind from the southwest had risen almost to a hurricane, and the flying embers from the falling buildings were quickly caught up and carried high upon the roofs of the houses adjoining, which were soon in flames. Thus the fire spread from building to building, and from block to block, until it seemed evident that the city was doomed. All this time the fire was moving towards Farwell Hall and the business center of the city.

I now gave up the fight, and made haste to recross the river, hurrying back to my quarters — my

living room and office — in the Farwell Hall Building.

The fire followed so rapidly that several times I had to shake the falling embers from my coat. Arriving at the hall, I gathered up a number of belongings which I especially wished to save, and, placing them close to the door of my office, went out to find a conveyance so as to transfer them to a place of safety. It was now between one and two o'clock in the morning, and not a carriage or truck could be found.

While still looking for a conveyance I saw in the distance, coming up Clark Street, a horse attached to an express wagon, running at full speed, without a driver, and ten or fifteen men running after it trying to capture the animal.

I made a dash for the flying steed, but in turning from one street into another he slipped and fell, and in a moment a crowd of men were on top of him, each claiming the right of possession. Not caring to share in the contest, I returned to the hall, and commenced the task of carrying my effects toward Lake Michigan, half a mile distant.

On the way to the lake I passed the present location of the Palmer House, then being erected, the foundation of which had only been built to the level of the street. Believing that the rooms and underground passages would afford a temporary place of security for some of my things, I walked on a plank down into the cellar, and hid two large valises in the darkest corner I could find. As yet, only a few people were moving out of their homes in this section of the city, and, as I noticed the seeming indifference of those who had come to the windows of their houses, I called out to them to escape for their lives, as the city was doomed to destruction. Some became alarmed; others only laughed.

I returned to the hall for another load of my belongings, and after securing all I could carry, started in a more direct route for the lake, the streets being lighted up by the glare of the oncoming conflagration. After getting about half-way to the shore, I stopped and deposited my burden on the front steps of a fine residence I was passing, thinking I would soon return and find them there. Again, for the third time, I went back to my rooms, and, gathering up a few more articles, started for the stone steps. I found, however, on reaching the house, that the things I had left there were covered several feet deep with other people's belongings, and I never saw them again.

By this time the people were fully awake, rushing about the street, or anxiously looking out of their windows and from the tops of their houses in the direction of the fire. I could not help thinking of the Bible story of the destruction of the Cities of the Plain in the long ago, as many still made light of those who said the city would be destroyed. The air was filled with flying sparks of fire, resembling a spring snowstorm, when the sky is filled with huge, falling flakes.

As I pressed on, two men carrying a sick man on a stretcher overtook me. After passing a short distance ahead, they stopped and laid him by the side of the street, as the invalid, being quite sure the city would not be destroyed, did not wish to be carried farther.

As soon as the carriers had been paid off and discharged I employed them to assist me in carrying my effects to the lakeside; but before we reached our destination, in looking southward, they saw that the fire was sweeping through the southeastern section of the city, where they

lived.

Dropping my goods in the middle of the street, and without waiting for compensation, they rushed away to secure their own homes.

Again I secured help, and at last reached the lake, where I deposited my trunks and possessions close by the edge of the water, with the thought that if the flames came to the edge of the lake I would walk into the water and be saved from the heat. Remembering my first attempt at carrying my goods away from Farwell Hall, I returned to the Palmer House block, to secure, if possible, my first cargo, very much fearing that the things would not be there when I reached the place, as I thought some night wanderer might have noticed my leaving them and appropriated them to his own use. Much to my joy, I found them still there, and carried them away to the lake.

By this time I was greatly exhausted, and almost famished for want of water, that along the shore not being fit to drink. I asked another refugee, who was in like case with myself, watching his little store of precious things, if he would look out for mine while I returned into the city to get some water to drink.

The man consenting, I went back to Wabash Avenue, one of the finest residential streets in the city, and, entering one of the large houses, asked if I might have some water. I was told to go into the rear of the building and get all I wished. I found a faucet, but, on attempting to draw water, air rushed out instead. This was my first intimation that the water works, two miles to the northward, had been destroyed. A few minutes later I heard a terrific explosion, which seemed to shake the city, and was told that the city gas works had blown up.

Things began to look very desperate — no water, no light in the houses, and the city in flames! I made my way back again to the lake and, wrapping myself in a great overcoat, lay down behind one of the large trunks which I had saved.

Thus sheltered from the wind, I slept for an hour.

On awaking I could hear the rush and roar of the fire coming nearer and nearer. The sun, slowly rising out of the waters of the lake, seemed like a red ball of fire. The wind had not fallen, and huge waves were breaking on the shore at my feet.

I now felt that I must have water to drink, and, after wandering along the shore for some distance, found some small rowboats, and asked a man near by, who seemed to be their owner, if I might have one to go out into the lake for fresh water. "Yes," he said; if you can manage the boat you can have it, as we are not likely to have much more boating in this section for sometime to come."

So I took possession of one, and rowed down to where my goods were deposited. Rolling them on board, I made my way out into the lake, passing through the piling on which the railway was built, in front of the city. After getting my boat through the piling, I rowed out far enough to find fresh water. Then, tying my boat to some timbers that were being used for the erection of a new breakwater, I climbed up on the pile of lumber and for several hours watched the destruction of the city.

Every few minutes a loud explosion was heard. I afterwards learned that these were caused by the blowing up of buildings — by order of General Sheridan, who was in the city at the time — so as to form a barrier against the fire and prevent its spreading to the southward.

It was interesting to watch the tramps and thieves carrying away on their backs large bales of silk and satin goods which they had taken from the burning stores in the wholesale district. Most of them followed the railway track southward, not knowing that at the place where the track reached the land a company of fire insurance agents were waiting with open arms to relieve them of their burdens.

The day wore away, but the city was still burning, and, as the sun was sinking in the west, a song came into my mind which I had been singing a few days before in Mr. Moody's large Sunday-school on the North Side, and I sang it through as I sat there, with the waves beating about me. The first verse was as follows:

"Dark is the night, and cold the wind is blowing,  
Nearer and nearer comes the breakers' roar;  
Where shall I go, or whither fly for refuge?  
Hide me, my Father, till the storm is o'er."

I finally determined to get back to land, but was not aware of the fact that the riding of my boat upon the waves had almost sawn asunder the line with which it was attached to the timber. As I jumped into the boat the line broke, and I was swept out into the lake, the waves sweeping over my little craft.

For a moment I was in real danger of being lost, but I soon had the boat under control, and, after a few moments of hard work, reached the shore in safety.

I then secured a drayman, who for the sum of ten dollars agreed to carry me and my effects to the unburned end of the Fort Wayne & Chicago Railway if he could find it. He succeeded. I checked my goods for my home in the East, secured some refreshments at a near-by restaurant, and went back into the burnt district.

Farwell Hall was gone, and every building in that part of the city had disappeared. The paved streets, covered with hot bricks and long coils of burnt and twisted telegraph wire, told something of the awful story. Most of the substance of these great buildings had actually been carried away by the hot air into the water of Lake Michigan.

After seeing something of the fearful destruction wrought by the conflagration, I made my way through the heated streets to the railway, and took an outgoing train for my home in Pennsylvania. As we left the city it seemed as though the whole country was on fire; in all directions we could see huge banks of flame sweeping across the prairies, and the air was filled to suffocation with smoke.

I was soon able to telegraph home of my safety and speedy return. It seemed as though this would end my work in Chicago, but two months later Mr. Moody telegraphed me to return and help him in the new temporary "Tabernacle," which had by that time been erected.

On my return to Chicago I learned that Mr. Moody, after reaching his home on the North Side, had aroused his sleeping neighbors, assisted men and women into conveyances, and urged them to flee for their lives.

As the billows of fire came nearer and nearer, Mr. Moody, with his wife and children, made his way into the northwestern district to a place of safety beyond the fire line. Before leaving her home Mrs. Moody took down from the wall an oil painting of her husband and asked him to carry it with him; but he declined, saying that he did not think it would look well for him to be running through the streets of Chicago with his picture in his arms at such a time! Speaking of the fire to a friend some time later, Mr. Moody remarked:

"All I saved was my Bible, my family and my reputation."

We continued to hold services and to help the poor and needy who had lost everything in the fire.

We slept together in a corner of the new Tabernacle, with nothing for a bed but a single lounge, and frequently the fierce prairie winds would blow the drifting snow into our room.

During these busy months Mr. Moody was always soliciting help from his friends, for the purpose of rebuilding the church which had been destroyed by fire.

I mention the following, as a characteristic incident of his skill in securing money: While walking with him one day along one of the principal streets of the city, we met one of his old acquaintances, and abruptly Moody said to him: "Look here, my friend, I am glad to see you, and I want one thousand dollars from you to help rebuild my church on the North Side." The man looked at him in amazement, and retorted: "I can't give it to you; I haven't got a thousand dollars." Mr. Moody quickly replied: "Well, you can borrow it." The gentleman was so amused and impressed with the earnestness of the petitioner that he at once said: "All right, Mr. Moody, I'll send you a check to-morrow," which he did.

In October of 1872 I moved my family to Chicago, and in the same year Mr. Moody went on his second trip to England, leaving me in charge of the work at the Tabernacle, assisted by Major Whittle, Richard Thain, Fleming H. Revell, and others. There were conversions in the church and Sunday-school every week.

After Mr. Moody's return we accepted an invitation to go to Springfield, Illinois, to hold services, which were attended with great blessing. Indeed, it seemed that if we had remained and thus worked in our own country a great revival would have taken place.

On our way to Springfield the train stopped at a station near Chicago, where a great crowd was assembled on the platform. Mr. Moody sat by an open window. Near by stood a tall, gaunt-looking countryman, with his hands in his pockets, looking at Mr. Moody through the window.

Mr. Moody asked him what the crowd meant, and the man replied:

"Oh, the folks have just come down to see the cars."

"Did you know that General Grant was on the train? " Mr. Moody inquired.

"Oh, is he?" the man exclaimed.

Mr. Moody, with a smile, told him that he was not. Quite nonplussed, the man walked down the platform a little way, but returned in a little while and said:

"Hello, Mister! We had a great time in town last night."

"How was that? " asked Mr. Moody.

"There was a woman here, and they wouldn't bury her."

"Why wouldn't they bury her? " Mr. Moody asked.

"Because she wasn't dead," the man smilingly answered, to the great amusement of his friends.

Mr. Moody turned to me and said: "Sankey, put that window down!"

About this time my friend Philip Phillips returned from Europe, where he had been singing for one hundred nights in succession. He came to Chicago and stopped with me. He made a very enticing offer, including a large salary and all expenses, if I would go with him to the Pacific coast and there assist him in his services of song.

I wouldn't promise anything until I had spent some hours in consultation and prayer with my friend, Mr. Moody; the result was that I remained with him.

In June, 1873, we sailed for England, Mr. Moody taking his wife and children with him, and my wife accompanying me, having left our two children with their grandparents.

The only books that I took with me were my Bagster Bible and my "musical scrap-book," which contained a number of hymns which I had collected in the past years, and many of which, in the providence of GOD, were to be used in arousing much religious interest among the people in the Old Country.

The voyage was uneventful, but of great interest to our little party. Mr. Moody, shortly after leaving Sandy Hook, for good and sufficient reasons retired to his berth, where he remained for the larger part of the voyage. I had the good fortune to escape seasickness, and was able to partake of my regular three meals a day. Mr. Moody would frequently send his ship steward over to my side of the ship to ascertain how I was getting on, and suggesting a large number of infallible remedies for seasickness.

~ end of chapter 1 ~

\*\*\*