

# Saga Of A Farm Boy Turned Missionary

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**INTERCOURSE** (Lancaster Co.) — Farming prepares people for many occupations. Farming prepared Elam Stoltzfus to teach Guatemalan Indians to raise animals, garden, build shelters, and other life-preserving skills.

These are only a few of the things that Elam accomplished in his 18-year term as a missionary. Although Elam was raised on a Lancaster County Amish farm and had only a ninth grade education plus two years of Bible college, he performed dentistry and medical skills for the people he was helping.

A passion to help the Guatemalan Indians was birthed when Elam, while still single, had visited the country with a musical missionary team. Later, he and his wife, Barbara, returned. The journey of their trip to the third world country and their 18-year stay in the jungle is filled with miracle after miracle that the Stoltzfuses attribute to God's faithfulness.

In 1972, the Stoltzfuses headed for the jungles where they were allotted 400 acres by the Guatemalan government under the Homestead Act, for the development of the jungle. Since the land bordered the river and the family wanted to work with Indian villages scattered along the river banks 40 miles upriver and 75 miles down river, someone suggested that the ideal method to reach the tribes would be a houseboat.

Elam agreed. "But it's so expensive and we don't have the funds," he said.

The person replied, "If you need it, God will supply it."

The next morning the family was given a 34-foot houseboat, which became their home for the next seven years. At that time, the Stoltzfuses had three children.

The river was the children's playground during their growing up years. "They became like little ducks," Barbara said. Three more children were later added to the Stoltzfus family.

Today the children's ages are Jean, 27; Miguel, 26; Virgil, 23; Anita, 18; Maria, 16; and Lisa, 15.

Of those beginning years in the jungle, Elam said, "We knew very little of what we were getting into."

At first, the Stoltzfus's prime

goal was to preach to the Indians. They did. But the Indian's physical needs appalled the missionary family.

The people were extremely poor and undernourished. They lived mostly on tortillas, beans, and wild meat. The lack of hygiene and an unbalanced diet resulted in many deaths and illnesses.

Pigs and chickens were allowed to run in and out of their houses, which resulted in a constant problem with parasites.

When an animal was butchered, the family had to eat the meat within a few days because there was no way to preserve the food. So much of the meat went to waste because they had no way to can or freeze it.

Alarmed, the Stoltzfuses watched as babies drank coffee and Coke from their baby bottles.

"I thought of so many ways that the people could have better lives if they only knew many of the methods I learned growing up on an Amish farm," Elam said.

His first concern was to teach them to grow vegetables and raise cattle. But the people were convinced that vegetables would not grow in their climate because a government program to raise vegetables in the jungle had failed a few years earlier. As a farmer, Elam understood why the program had failed. The seeds were donated

as Elam was growing up.

Although, in the early years, the Stoltzfuses had taken along canning supplies for their family's use, the natives did not have jars or canners. Even if they had, it would not have been practical since they cook over a wood fire.

"When I grew up, we canned everything, because Amish did not have electricity for refrigeration and freezers. The natives don't have it either so I knew how much better their diets could be improved if they could preserve their foods through canning."

Because the village where the Stoltzfuses settled was 50 miles from a medical clinic and took two to six hours to reach by river or jungle trails, many of the native's illnesses and injuries went untreated. Periodically, Elam would arrange for doctors, dentists, and nurses to visit the area for a few weeks to perform needed medical help.

But that temporary help could not meet the numerous physical needs caused by primitive living conditions.

"I never thought I would get involved in medical work," Elam said, "but the people kept coming for help."

At first, the Stoltzfuses did simple things like doctoring colds and handing out vitamins. One day

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from leftover stock that would not germinate. Eventually Elam was able to obtain hybrid seeds, and, today, some of the villagers are beginning to plant tomatoes, cabbage, radishes, string beans, and cucumbers.

Heifer Project International also provided heifers to several of the villages. Some of the people have been very successful with the project; others not. But 15 years later, most of the villagers have cattle.

Planting and harvesting is done by hand, much like the Amish did

a man received a machete slash across his hand. With no medical help available, Elam used a ham radio to contact a doctor friend in Florida. The doctor told him how to clean the wound and stitch it. It took 35 stitches.

"Again and again, we saw God heal. We had no training, but we saw good success," Elam said.

Barbara learned to deliver babies by following the instructions in a book. So many villagers came to them for help that the Stoltzfus's daughter began to



Elam and Barbara Stoltzfus believe their farming background prepared them for work in the jungles of Guatemala. On August 31, communist guerrillas burned down the missionary complex that included medical and dental clinics, a canning facility, and housing. The Stoltzfuses are determined to return and rebuild the facility that is desperately needed in that area.

deliver babies when she was only 14. Later she got her nursing degree in the states and returned to Guatemala to help with the medical needs.

About 10 years ago, a 100x30-foot building was designed to be used as a hospital.

A dentist trained Elam to extract and fill teeth.

The Stoltzfus's oldest son, Virgil, attained a pilot license and a plane to transport the wounded to the city hospital, which could be reached in one hour by air but takes 18 hours by river. The plane was used also to fly supplies in and out.

Last year, Elam was able to purchase complete cannery equipment for \$27,000 and transport it to Guatemala. The missionaries were almost finished building the cannery when attacked by the URNG, which stands for the National Revolutionary Guatemalan Union when translated from Spanish.

Although the family lived in a combat zone where guerrilla warfare often erupted, the Stoltzfuses did not expect trouble because they were not involved politically and they were helping the natives.

But the missionaries were concerned with the destruction that the fighting caused the natives. According to Elam, the URNG's ploy was to make the government military look bad and often did this by posing as the military.

During the Stoltzfus's 18-year stay in Guatemala, they said the URNG often dressed in stolen military uniforms and would storm into villages. The natives would rush into the jungle to hide while the gunmen ransacked the villages of food and valuables. The gunmen would then leave, take off their uniforms, and return as the "saviors" to the villagers.

"People were often confused about who the enemy really was — the military or the URNG," Elam said.

Two months before the bombing, the URNG had bombed a military boat. The missionaries' policy was to help those in need regardless of military affiliation. Consequently, they flew several wounded soldiers to the military hospital.

The URNG retaliated. On August 31, the URNG held the Stoltzfuses at gunpoint for 11 hours while they looted the hospital, cannery, personal home and guest home, and then burned the

buildings to the ground, including the tractor and two airplanes.

At gunpoint the URNG forced Virgil, the oldest son to use his boat to transport the loot. When the guerrillas laid their machine guns aside while they carried the loot off the boat, Virgil grabbed a machine gun and held his captives at gunpoint.

Virgil said, "I could kill every one of you, but I want you to know that we did not come here to kill. We came to help people."

Then Virgil threw the gun at their feet. The leader told him, "We have orders to kill you, but if you and your family get out of the country within the next 72 hours, we'll let you go."

With no more than the clothes they were wearing, the Stoltzfuses escaped to the states.

"Everything personal — our children's pictures, our clothing — was wiped out," Elam said.

He estimates the building and equipment loss to be a half a million.

"If our faith was in material things, we would be devastated," Elam said, "But we believe everything has a purpose. Our hearts are with the people. We started with nothing before. We will do it again."

The family has a two-year rebuilding plan.

Elam shrugged when asked whether they aren't afraid that the URNG will attack them again?

Elam said that the URNG has admitted responsibility for the attack. They realize now that they destroyed a facility that was helping their people and now the people have nothing. The URNG said the Stoltzfus family could come back and rebuilt if they do not treat military soldiers in the clinic.

Presently, the family is waiting on ongoing discussions to have that clarified.

During the Stoltzfus's 18-year stay, they established six churches while there and trained natives to assume leadership for them. Now, these people encourage the missionary family by reminding them of the biblical story of Job, a righteous man who lost his family and possessions but in the end received more than he had in the beginning.

"It looks impossible, but we believe God wants us to return and start again," Elam said.

The Stoltzfuses can be contacted at (717) 768-3602, David E. Stoltzfus.



The Stoltzfus children have worked with their parents to help meet the needs that Guatemalans face in the El Peten jungle. From left, back row: Virgil, Jean and husband, Miguel and his wife. Front row: Anita, Lisa, and Maria.