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## Review - *Echoes From the Hills*

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## ECHOES FROM THE HILLS

— by Gladys Toler Burris

In *ECHOES FROM THE HILLS*, Winnie Corley brings us the warm, intimate biography of a man who, early in life, dedicated himself “to make the world a better place because I have lived.”

Much of the warmth comes from the human interest story of Sam West’s family, reminiscent of “The Waltons.” Life was not easy in early-day, rural Oklahoma, especially for a country preacher with no regular salary. Yet his ingenious wife could transform a hardship into a pleasure, as in this episode:

“Christmas came, and there was one quarter to spare for four children’s gifts. Leona dug into the scrapbag and made a fine handkerchief for each child. On a shopping spree, she bought a five-cent bag of marbles for the boys; a five-cent vase for each of the two girls, some hard candy and four oranges. . . That Christmas stood out in the minds of everyone.”

Against this warm family background, Sam West stands as the pivotal figure. The book revolves around him and his faith: his conflicts, his decisions, and the values that emerged.

As a youth, Sam West was ambitious, gifted in public speaking, interested in politics. He would “make the world a better place,” he decided, by being a United States Senator. The son of a country preacher, he had lived in a dug-out in Western Oklahoma Territory; that life was not for him. Indeed, after his engagement to beautiful Leona Summers, he vowed to provide well for her.

But a thought haunted him. He tried to ignore it. Ironically, it was this love for Leona that forced his decision.

Sam tells in his own words:

“That night, I had taken Leona home, and was on fire with desire and anticipation. . . Again, the thought spoke to me, ‘Young man, if you don’t do the work I want you to do, you will never marry that girl. Her life will be taken from you.’ That startled me. . . There in the pasture, I fell on my knees and cried, ‘God, if you will not permit that calamity — I will do your work.’ I kept that promise.”

He preached his first sermon in 1905, at the age of 20; he preached his last sermon when he was 91.

In an even more dramatic way, God affected another of his decisions.

To supplement the family income, the young husband taught school and farmed. A thunderstorm rolled in one day while he was plowing. Leona, watching from their dug-out, saw a lightning flash, saw Sam fall. . . All night, she and the doctor watched by the bed of the seemingly lifeless body. Just before dawn, he began to moan.

It seemed to Sam that he had been brought from death to life. What did God want from that life he had

spared?

He sold the farm. Preaching — and teaching — became his life work.

The author livens her account of Sam’s ministry with anecdotes, often amusing or startling. In one backward community, for instance, he was organizing a church, and in the course of a pastoral call, asked for a Bible.

“The lady of the house dug around, mumbling, ‘Now, I saw that Bible not over a month ago.’ Then with a triumphant, ‘Here it is,’ she handed him an old 1847 Hymn Book which had only the words, no music. She was not being funny; she actually thought this was a Bible.”

Sam’s dismay grew during the first Sunday School meeting. Each child had been asked to memorize a Bible verse; one little girl rose and recited, “Mary had a little lamb. . .” Scarcely anyone laughed because few knew the difference.

No learning, spiritual or secular, had touched this isolated community. No school existed. To Sam, this was intolerable; it affected his own children, and he placed a high value on education. When the next term began, school was held in the Wests’ home, with Sam as teacher.

We see “what God wanted from the life he had spared.” Such ministry calls to mind “manna in the wilderness.”

Elder Sam West is remembered, not only as preacher and teacher, but as missionary and counselor. As Associational Missionary for the Southwest Baptist Association, his greatest joy was in ministering to the state’s Institutions of Correction: at Granite, Paul’s Valley, Tecumseh, Stringtown, and even at McAlester.

He loved these people, counseled with them, often met their families and formed warm friendships. Grateful letters give proof of his rehabilitating effect. Had this been his only work, he would have fulfilled his dedication: “to make the world a better place.”

*ECHOES FROM THE HILLS* is the name he gave the church paper he published when he lived in the Cookson Hills. “Arise, contend thou before the mountains, and let the hills hear thy voice” (Micah 6:1).

Such a warm, intimate portrayal could have come only from one who knew this man well. Winnie Corley knew him well. Sam West was her father. Sensitively, she entitled his biography with the symbolic *ECHOES FROM THE HILLS*. The book may be purchased from the author (Box 93; Carney, OK 74832).