

## *Me and A Camel Named Clyde* by LaBreeska Hemphill

A brisk knock on the door of the motel room where Joel and I spent the night was our signal to dress for breakfast. It was one a.m., and it seemed I had just closed my eyes. My pillow had left a lot to be desired and kept me awake much of the night. I made the remark to Joel that I now know how the cowboys must have felt when they used their saddles for pillows.

Oh well, this was *not* the U.S.A.; we were in Egypt, and today was a day of great adventure. We were about to climb Mt. Sinai. Our group had a goal to reach the top of the mountain in time to watch the sunrise. There was no time to waste. A bus would transport us to the base of the mountain at St. Catherines, an ancient monastery that dates back to 385 A.D.



From there we were to rent camels that would take us two thirds of the way up, then without their assistance we would climb for another hour to the mountain peak.

My decision to make such a grueling journey was carefully weighed against the odds. If the opportunity ever presented itself again, I would be at least another year older and not as agile as I am today. I chose to go with my husband and climb the mountain of Moses.

As our caravan of camels (carrying twenty friends from Nashville) began its ascent, I knew I had made a wise choice. The stars and the moon lit up a pristine sky. The Milky Way, directly overhead, seemed just beyond our finger tips.

In the darkness, from time to time I could see our silhouettes on the mountain side as we snaked along. Joel was on the lead camel and began to sing every old gospel hymn that came to mind, and we all joined in:

*Out of Egypt I have traveled  
Through the darkness dreary  
Over hills and valleys  
And across the desert sand . . .*



When we sang *Camping In Canaan*, time seemed to stand still.

Here we were on the same mountain, beneath the same stars, using the same type of travel as the Bedouin Nomads that have roamed the hillsides for thousands of years. And most of all, praising the same Almighty God. The God of Moses. As we slowly made our trek up the mountain I was moved to tears. It seemed that I could almost feel the breath of God in the early morning breeze that brushed against my cheeks.

That two-hour camel ride was an exhilarating experience, but after reaching a certain point, the camels could go no further and we had to proceed on foot. There were seven hundred crude steps now to climb before

we reached the top. The steps were actually rocks placed by the monks from the monastery, through the centuries as acts of piety when they felt they needed to do penance. Some of the steps were loose, covered by pebbles and rock pieces that were likely to cause a trip or a fall, so every move had to be made with caution. The climb now became an endurance contest.

The air soon became thin, and ever so often, I just had to sit down and catch my breath. At that point I realized I was slowing Joel down, and neither of us might make it to the summit to see the sunrise. After coming this far I wanted at least one of us to have that experience, so at my insistence, Joel waved goodbye to me and continued on. I stayed behind with a couple of likewise winded companions, and our Egyptian guide, Isom, to move at our own pace. Before long Joel faded out of sight. When I could no longer look up and see him, my need to reach the top of that mountain on time became paramount. It ceased to be something I *wanted* to do and became something I *had* to do. I had to be there with Joel and share the moment. This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience, and I couldn't afford to miss it.

Mustering every ounce of strength I had from within my almost depleted reservoir, I set my jaw with determination. I would make it to the top on time if it killed me. As I continued to climb without let up, my lungs felt like they would explode. My temples were pounding, and I felt nauseous but I steadily moved forward and upward.

Finally the outline of the precipice came into view, and there was Joel anxiously searching for me. When he spotted me he rushed down to help me with the remaining few steps. Tears were streaming down both our faces while we searched out the highest available boulder to rest upon as that awesome sight came into view. *The Sunrise*

The shadows slowly began to fade and give way to a harmony of color that crescendoed into a full orchestra. The brilliance of God's glory

disclosed itself with golden rays that swept across the horizon, creating an unbelievable sight of splendor and beauty that left us breathless.

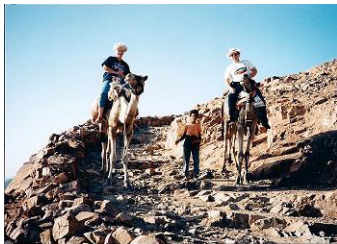
Joel and I were at the pinnacle. There was no place to go from there but down. From where we were sitting we could look straight down for what seemed to be *miles*. We have had a lot of euphoric moments in our years together, been many places, and scaled some pretty high mountains, but this was the ultimate. And never had we put our physical endurance to a greater test than we would before that day was over, and it wasn't over yet.

When the thrill of the moment subsided by the light of the early morning sun, I began to survey my surroundings. It was then that I was reminded of the adage, "*What goes up must come down,*" and realized there was no easy way off that mountain.

The decision to take another route down was made by our leader and guide. This route was steps *all* the way, *thirty six hundred* of them to be exact. I'm talking about steps that sometimes had as much as a two foot drop. By the time Joel and I had tackled about a *thousand* of them my legs no longer felt like they belonged to me.

Just when I thought I could go no farther we came to a bend in the trail and discovered two little Bedouin boys leading camels. At this point the trail split and we could go back the way we came by camel or continue on foot down *twenty-six hundred* more steps. I felt I had just been smiled on.

"Oh Honey, get us a camel," I cried. Joel was hesitant, and I couldn't believe it! I was sure that those boys and their camels were there to save my life! Joel wasn't so sure but went ahead and rented two camels from Solomon, (two out of three of our camel jocks were named Solomon) for ten dollars apiece.



I gratefully climbed on board. However I wasn't on Clyde very long until I realized that there is a drastic difference between moving in an upward position on a camel, and going downward. In fact one has never lived until one has gone down a mountain on a camel. When I said earlier that traveling by camelback was the mode of travel used for thousands of years, I left out an important note. The wooden saddles, without a doubt, have not been improved upon in that length of time either. There are six-inch saddle horns in both front and back that gouge you in the stomach or in the back with each jolting downward step. I was constantly being thrown forward on that crazy thing, and later I had bruises to prove it.

I tried every conceivable way to make peace with that saddle -to no avail. Ever so often, when I could stand it no longer, I cried, "Stop! Stop!" Clyde would then have to get down on his knees in the gravel to let me off. To say that he wasn't excited about this is an understatement. It made him mad! He was mad at me, mad at Solomon, and mad at the stones he had to kneel on.

It was an undertaking to make him go down, and he fussed and fumed at every stop. He didn't want to do it, and wasn't going to unless he was forced. Solomon and the other boy were just children, about nine or ten years old, and were very sympathetic with me.

They made Clyde kneel down anyway so I could get off for a spell. I need to add here that ours were one hump dromedaries, with the saddle on top of the hump. Even with Clyde kneeling it was a long drop to the ground,

and because of this, Joel just had to sit there and watch. He did take off one of his shirts and threw it to me for more padding, and I used my overshirt. Then I proceeded to climb back onto the torture rack. By this time I could hardly mount. My legs were like rubber; they just wouldn't obey the command.

Eventually I got one leg across Clyde's back, and found I could go no further. I couldn't get on, and I couldn't get off. The biggest boy saw my predicament and ran to the opposite side to assist by pulling me by the hand. When he realized that we were getting nowhere, he called the smaller boy to pull, while he rushed around and started boosting my backside with his shoulder. Before long I was on board again and was surprised to find little brown hands stuffing their own shirts in front and back of my saddle. Then we were off and lurching again. From that moment on I became resigned to my fate and started trying to get my mind off the pain.

Amused at the constant chatter of our young camel jocks as we moved along, Joel commented, "I can't understand a word they're saying." "Well, ever so often I hear the word sheesh," I countered. "I figure they are discussing the size of tip (buck-sheesh) they will receive for landing these two green horns safely at the bottom.

Those boys were proud of those ornery old camels. Every now and then Solomon would look up at me and grin, flashing his pearly whites against his sun parched skin. In broken English he would say, "Camel is good!" He wanted me to brag on Clyde. But in my ever-present misery I would groan in response, "Camel is *not* good! Camel is okay, but *not* good!"

When I was thoroughly convinced that I would not live to see the end of this experience, St. Catherines Monastery came into view. Clyde saw it too and broke into a full trot. (This response in horses is called barn-sour). He knew that the end was near, and he was as happy about that as I was.

My pain was greatly intensified with the pound of each hoof beat as Clyde galloped along. I glanced back at Joel who looked as though he was actually enjoying the ride. I couldn't believe it. He had either made peace with his saddle or was too numb to know the difference. As the margin between Joel and I continued to broaden, I yelled back at him, "Joel Hemphill, I have now followed you to the end of the earth, and this time I found the jumping off place!"

Well, we eventually got to the end of the camel ride, and I really did live to tell the tale. That night our group stayed at a lavish spa resort on the Dead Sea, and before the day was over I was lying in the lap of luxury enjoying an hour-long Swedish massage. As I was being pampered with another hour long foot massage and pedicure, little was left of the Mt. Sinai excursion except a few tell-tale bruises and the unforgettable memory of Solomon's command to Clyde echoing in my ears, Yaa-dee!!! Yaaa-deee!!!