

INTO THE LIGHT

Half-Century as Missionaries in Brazil



Dr. Tom Latham

INTO THE LIGHT

Half-Century as Missionaries in Brazil



Dr. Tom Latham



DynoTech Publishing, Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA

Copyright © 2026 by Dr. Tom Latham. (www.brazilwrestler.com)

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the written permission of the author or publisher, except for brief quotations in reviews or articles allowed by U.S. and International copyright laws.

This autobiography is a work of non-fiction. While every reasonable precaution has been taken in the preparation of this book, the author and publisher make no explicit guarantees as to the accuracy of the information contained herein. In some cases, names of people and places may have been altered to protect their privacy.

Edited and published by Dave Carlson, DynoTech Publishing, Colorado Springs, Colorado, USA. (www.dynotech.com)

This book may be ordered through booksellers or from IngramSpark.

ISBN: 978-1-885708-18-2 (paperback)

Scripture quotations are from the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2025927400

Print information is available on the last page.

Printing History:

February 2026:

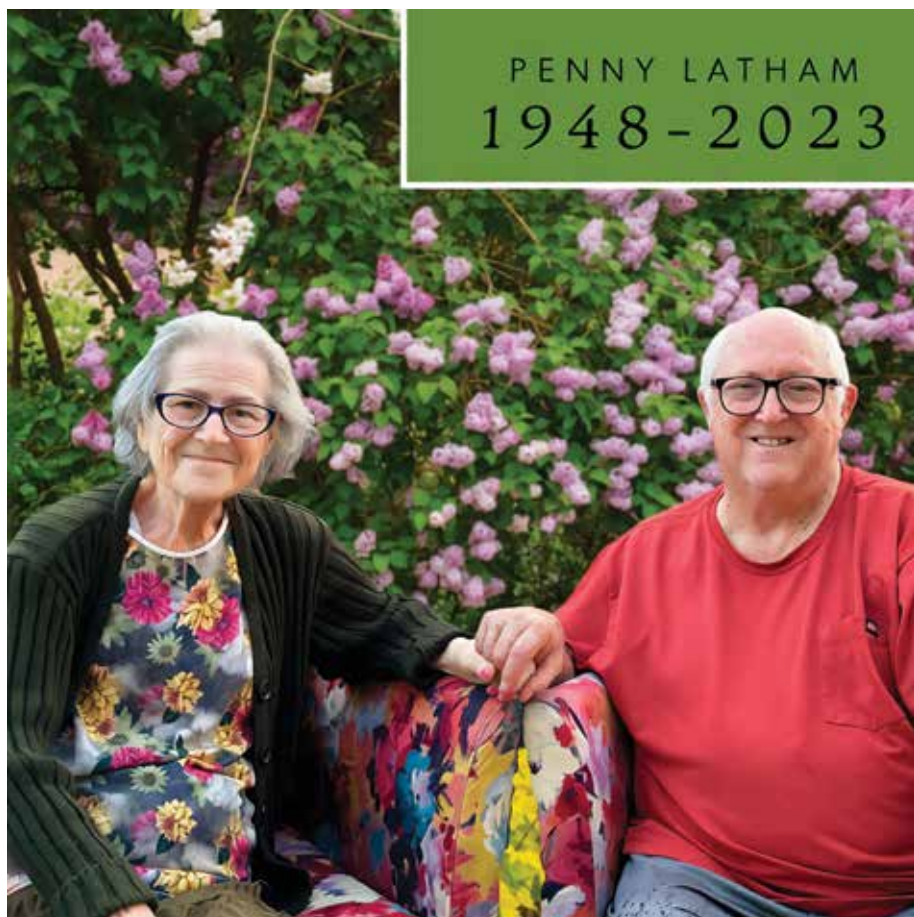
First Edition.

Contents

DEDICATION.....	v
FORWARD by Mike Whitesell.....	vii
AUTHOR COMMENTS.....	ix
CHAPTER 1 Who Coulda Thunk It?.....	1
CHAPTER 2 Bullies.....	9
CHAPTER 3 Grace and Grace Alone.....	15
CHAPTER 4 Shore Duty.....	21
CHAPTER 5 Experience in Evangelism.....	27
CHAPTER 6 A Civilian Again.....	29
CHAPTER 7 California Youth Pastor.....	33
CHAPTER 8 MINUS 70 Degrees is NOT Acceptable.....	37
CHAPTER 9 Great Minnesota Squirrel Test.....	43
CHAPTER 10 George Kochian.....	47
CHAPTER 11 Camp Chetek.....	51
CHAPTER 12 Deputation.....	59
CHAPTER 13 Physical Exams.....	65
CHAPTER 14 Arriving in Brazil.....	69
CHAPTER 15 Our First Ministry.....	75
CHAPTER 16 Doca the Drunk.....	81
CHAPTER 17 Strange Customs.....	85
CHAPTER 18 Water Skiing in Brazil.....	89
CHAPTER 19 White Hand.....	91
CHAPTER 20 From Chaos to Tranquility.....	95
CHAPTER 21 Luzia and Dude.....	103

CHAPTER 22	Three Lathams at Pillsbury	109
CHAPTER 23	Our Third Church.....	115
CHAPTER 24	Are You Kidding Me?	119
CHAPTER 25	Revenge is Biblical.....	125
CHAPTER 26	We’ve Been Robbed—Again!.....	129
CHAPTER 27	The Sign That Flew.....	137
CHAPTER 28	Gigi and Fernanda	139
CHAPTER 29	Moving to Gravataí.....	143
CHAPTER 30	Donut Ministry	147
CHAPTER 31	Freestyle Wrestling Ministry	151
CHAPTER 32	Andressa, Larissa, and Carla	155
CHAPTER 33	Getting a Van Driver’s License.....	159
CHAPTER 34	Teen Evangelistic Mime Drama Team	161
CHAPTER 35	Public School Things	165
CHAPTER 36	Food Evangelism	169
CHAPTER 37	Trickle-Down Evangelism.....	173
CHAPTER 38	Dad Ministry.....	177
CHAPTER 39	Interesting People.....	181
CHAPTER 40	Our House Was a Zoo.....	189
CHAPTER 41	Three Men Sent from God.....	193
CHAPTER 42	Eulogy for Penny Sue Latham	199
CHAPTER 43	On Being a Missionary Kid.....	203
CHAPTER 44	Another Missionary Kid’s Life	207
CHAPTER 45	A Daughter’s Perspective	211
	More Pictures	213
	Author Biography—Dr. Tom Latham	217
	Latham Family Creed.....	218
	Acknowledgments and Thanks	219

DEDICATION



This book is dedicated to Missionary Penny Sue Latham, who gave her life to serving her Lord first and her family second. The Lathams were blessed beyond measure with her generosity and creative spirit. The art she left behind will always remind us of her God-given talent and her dedication to knowing Jesus and making him known to everyone who crossed her path.

FORWARD by Mike Whitesell

Tom and Penny are the quintessential missionary couple. Their mutual respect and devotion to Christ led them to love, serve, and proclaim their faith to the people of Brazil. Tom is continuing that decades-long calling with astonishing vitality and passion.

Tom is one of the most interesting and compassionate followers of Jesus I have ever met. His unique life story and his friendship have together challenged and encouraged me to be a better man, husband, and servant of Christ.

You're getting ready to read an exhilarating account of the story about two people who were, in Tom Latham's own words, "crazy in love with Jesus and willing to serve Him anywhere in the world." In God's providence, Tom and Penny ended up in Brazil. What an adventure it has been!

From a difficult childhood few of us can imagine, to a transformative encounter with Christ, Tom was immediately launched into a life of education, evangelism, and church planting with Penny, the love of his life.

Prepare to read about dramatic conversions, innovative ministry approaches, multiple robberies, opposition faced inside and outside the church, and touching, redeeming relationships that developed over the years.

The Latham family stayed in our home several times over the years. They regaled us with some of these stories, treated us to Tom's famous cinnamon rolls, and shared his sense of humor. Their story of serving our Savior is unique in every way.

Having passed the age of eighty, Tom continues his ministry. After reaching 100 years, he intends to be recognized by the *Guinness Book of World Records* as the 'oldest youth pastor/wrestling coach in the world.' Read this book. You'll have little doubt that it could happen.

**Mike Whitesell, Former Pastor,
Community Church, Battle Creek, Michigan**

AUTHOR COMMENTS

Into the Light describes what happened to me as an abandoned adolescent who developed into a troubled teenager. I was floundering around, pleasing only myself. On May 6, 1964, as a troubled young man, I was faced with the eternal penalty for the lifestyle I had chosen.

Deciding to accept the offer of salvation by grace alone, I jumped out of the darkness surrounding me and ran to ‘The Light of the World’ (John 8:12). Jesus accepted my sinner’s prayer of repentance and salvation, giving me eternal life, as He promised to anyone who would call on Him.

Storytelling is one of my passions, and through my books, I strive to convey joy, invite reflection on my faith, and move readers emotionally through real-life experiences. If my stories move you emotionally, I have succeeded.

Some images and illustrations in this book were generated or enhanced using artificial intelligence (AI) technology to enrich your reading experience.

Dr. Tom Latham

*God only had one Son and
He made Him a missionary.*

Here are some kind words from a few of my many dear friends:

It has been a delight to know and follow the life and ministry of Dr. Tom Latham for 55 years. He is a faithful and fruitful servant of God. If I were still teaching my course, 'Lives of Great Missionaries,' I would make this autobiography a required reading.

*Dr. Sam Telloyan, former missions teacher
at Pillsbury Baptist Bible College
in Owatonna, Minnesota*

It has been a joy to get to know Tom and Penny Latham over the past 17 years. I saw their heart for the Lord and His people reflected in their small acts of kindness and in their help with developing and mentoring young lives.

*Mike Martin, South American Field Director,
Baptist World Mission*

My fellowship with the Lathams began fifty years ago when I was the leader of the South American Prayer Band at Pillsbury Baptist Bible College. Both churches I pastored supported the Lathams, with the last one being their sending church. God has blessed their lifetime of faithful service, to which I gladly give witness.

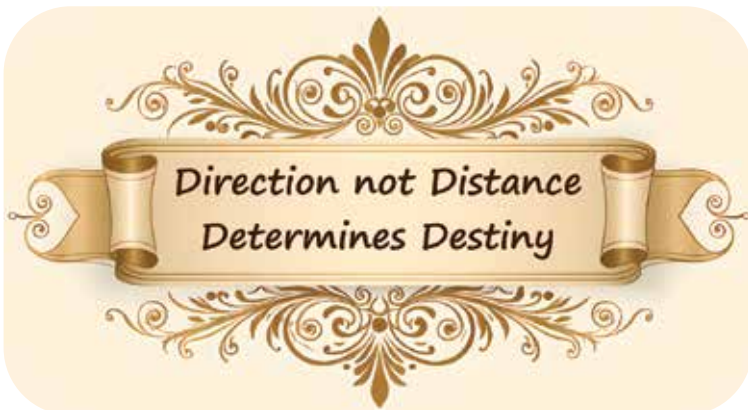
*Dave White, former pastor, Bryant Avenue Baptist
Church, Minneapolis, Minnesota*

Your updates are the most encouraging thing you do for those who pray for you around the world. I think your ministry has been worldwide for all these years, and I am glad and blessed to be part of it. Your impact is huge. It resembles your heart and has allowed me to ‘learn to serve so I can serve to learn.’

*Douglas Hazewinkel, former Pillsbury College
wrestler, National Champion, 1976*

Tom lived a crazy, adventurous life in his early years. The option was there for him to have been voted the most unlikely to succeed in life! BUT Tom knew when he got saved, he wanted to be a preacher. Many of us back then did not have a clear direction for our lives, but Tom did! I continue to marvel at how he allows God to use him in so many ways, places, and times! This book is packed with examples of what passion looks like in the life of an energetic believer.

*Richard L. Bilyeu General Building Contractor
(retired), Redmond, OR*



CHAPTER 1

Who Coulda Thunk It?

On March 7, 1945, at a small hospital in Lebanon, Oregon, Loretta Elvira Latham gave birth to her second child: ME. I weighed just four pounds and six ounces. World War II was drawing to a close, but the government still stamped my birth certificate, allowing our family to buy one extra pound of red meat.

After my birth, Mom—Loretta Latham—took me from the hospital to Grandpa John Franklin Taylor’s farm beside Crabtree Creek, near the small town of Lacombe, Oregon. There, the town’s entering and leaving signs stood on the same post above a population sign that now boasted 151 residents, counting me.

We stayed at the farm for a month. Then, my parents, Harry and Loretta, took my sister Harriet and me to visit family in Newark, Ohio. When we returned to the farm ten months later, I weighed less than 10 pounds. That was worrying.

The doctor who delivered me told Grandma Ella Mae, Grandpa’s second wife, “Every time Tommy opens his mouth, put something in it or he won’t make it.”

Grandma fed me with an eye dropper, and if you could see me now, you’d know how well that worked! Harriet and I stayed on the farm until I was two years old, under the loving care of Grandma Ella and Grandpa Jack. Everyone in the family called

her Grandma Shortie because she was so close to the ground, or as they say nowadays, ‘vertically challenged.’

Mom came back for us, and Grandma protested. “Jack, if you let Letty take the kids, I’m leaving you. They came here almost dead, and I saved their lives.” Grandpa always had a soft spot in his heart for his only daughter. That was probably because his first wife abandoned the family when Mom was only nine years old, leaving her to do the housework and cooking, without the marvelous Cinderella ending. Grandma Shortie left.

With Harry Latham gone, and Danny Boucher now my half-brother, instability became our normal. We moved constantly, relying on the bare minimum, and spent months in boarding homes. Alcohol cast a long shadow, defining much of our family’s struggle.

Danny was two years younger than me. Harriet and I tried to calm his tormented soul when he cried out for his mother late at night in various boarding homes.

I attended several schools in the San Francisco Bay Area. At the end of my second grade, we made some moves toward Oregon. I remember seeing the gun used in the robbery Mom was involved in, which sent her to the California Institute for Women in Chino. She spent three years there for theft and passing bad checks.

Harriet, Danny, and I ended up back on Grandpa’s farm. Julia was Grandpa’s third wife. She was a great lady who enjoyed hunting white-tailed deer and catching rainbow trout. Because Grandpa already had four mouths to feed, we saw Danny shipped off to his French-Canadian father in Washington State.

CHAPTER 2

Bullies

Almost everyone has met a bully at some point in their life. Since I've become a follower of the Nazarene, I handle bullying situations differently. The following three examples happened before I became a Christian.

Bully Example #1

Dale Spelbring was a teenage neighbor in Hopland, California. Dale I went to my grandfather's farm in Lacombe, Oregon, the summer before I started at Hopland High School. We planned to make some extra money by working in the fields.

One Saturday afternoon, we were hitchhiking to my Aunt Carol's house. A car with six teens passed us, and someone yelled, "Pull in your thumb; we're going to give you a ride."

Since I had attended five grammar schools in Lebanon, I recognized the kids in the car. Knowing their reputation as smart alecks and bullies, I suspected they would drive us twenty miles away and leave us stranded—a common trick. I was determined not to fall for it.

They came back, pulled up alongside us, and someone yelled, "We told you to pull in your thumbs, and we'd give you a ride. Now, get in."

CHAPTER 3

Grace and Grace Alone

I started my junior year at Lebanon Union High School. Since I had attended five different grammar schools in the area, I recognized many classmates. To keep gas in my '54 Chevy—bought for thirty-five dollars—I worked various odd jobs. In the spring, I tried out for the baseball team but was cut from the roster.

Work defined my early years: from chopping and delivering firewood for Uncle Bunky to moving irrigation pipes on a bean farm between school years. I couldn't find steady work during the year. In the fall, I pursued wrestling. After losing a close wrestle-off by one point, I was cut from the team.

That spring, two friends and I traveled to Hood River to plant trees for the forestry service. While there, we shoplifted and, after stealing gas while drunk, we were arrested. Grandpa got me out of jail again. Grandma Julia gave me a stern lecture, which I deserved.

Since my grandfather and two uncles were sailors, I joined the Navy Reserve and went to a monthly meeting on Friday night.

Upon high school graduation, I was supposed to take the most dangerous job in the woods: putting the cable on a felled tree so the caterpillar could pull it out of the ravine. If the cable ever breaks, the 'choke setter' had better be faster than the

descending log, or he was a goner. I had the tools and steel-toed shoes, ready to start on Monday.

On Sunday night, the logging company supervisor called. The job I expected was given to a school-bus acquaintance. I was upset and left without work. I chose to enlist in active duty with the Navy. Three months later, the cable broke on that logging job, killing my friend. That could have been me!

After seven weeks of boot camp in San Diego, California, I attended the Electrician's Mate school on the same base. After graduating, I was assigned to the USS Interceptor AGR-8, a radar picket ship out of San Francisco. The ship went out to sea for five-week tours, 500 miles off the West Coast. Our job was to make sure no airplane came into United States airspace without identifying itself, or it would be shot down.

My first assignment on the ship was working in the scullery, washing dishes. I was about to find out why I used to get carsick on Oregon's winding roads. I had an inner ear problem that caused me to get extremely dizzy and nauseous. This is why I would throw up on the rides at the Strawberry Fair.

The ship's rocking back and forth was a serious problem for me. I was washing dishes and puking into a bucket when Richard Edwards, a weatherman, stuck his head in the scullery. He said I looked terrible, and green—like The Hulk. When I told him I was seasick, he said he had the same problem. He offered to pray for me.

Whenever I needed advice, I went to Richard, who invited me to attend Calvary Baptist Church in San Francisco. Because Richard had duty, I went to the church by myself on May 6, 1964. After the church service, a teenager named Marie Liedecker asked me,

CHAPTER 7

California Youth Pastor

I was on the Western Baptist Bible College (WBBC) Missions Team. We went to various churches on Sunday night to give testimonies and sing. I usually told my life story and played the harmonica.

At the end of the spring semester, the school informed me I would not be able to take the finals because I still owed \$300 on my bill.

I called Grandma Julia and asked her to have her mother, a devout Christian, pray for me regarding my financial need. We went to a Baptist church in Monterey, California, where Grandma Julia's brother came to hear me play my harmonica. Afterward, he asked if it was true I needed three hundred dollars to pay my bill, so I could take my finals. When I confirmed, he took out his checkbook and wrote a check for the full amount. This was the first time someone helped with my school bill. Grateful to God for this provision, I was able to take my final exams.

I enjoyed going to WBBC. Someone, however, told me about a Bible college in Owatonna, Minnesota, that had a wrestling team.

I looked into it, and decided to attend Pillsbury Baptist Bible College (PBBC). I was going to drive my Honda motorcycle there after leaving WBBC. Before I left, I learned the government was

extending the GI bill to anyone who had served in the military during the Vietnam War, which had started in 1958.

This was good news for me. It would cost only \$900 a year to attend PBBC for room, board, and tuition. The government said it would send me \$125 a month. Finally, someone was going to help me with my school bill—my rich Uncle Sam!

Since I didn't need to work all summer to pay next year's school bill, I decided to accept an offer to serve as the summer youth pastor at First Baptist Church in Avenel, California, in the desert area of the Kettleman Hills.

During the summer, I organized activities for the teens and gave rides on my Honda. I would take teenage boys to the top of a hill, where I shared my faith. On the day before my last planned movie activity, I was washing my bike and noticed a young man cleaning his car. I invited him to that night's church movie.

He smirked at me. "You're the guy giving rides to teens and telling them they would have to walk down the mountain if they didn't accept Christ as their Savior."

"What are you talking about?" I asked. He told me he had heard I was giving boys a ride to try to force them into making a religious decision, or they would have to walk home.

Surprised, I explained what really happened: "I could've worked all summer for money, but I chose to spend my time taking boys for rides and sharing with them how they could be saved by accepting Jesus as their Savior. Now you share this accusation, which offends me greatly."

He backed off and apologized. He came to the meeting that

CHAPTER 8

MINUS 70 Degrees is NOT Acceptable

My trip's timing couldn't have been worse. At midnight, I found myself at 11,000 feet—about twice Denver's elevation—with cows blocking the road. I could not eat or sleep until I got down the mountain. I finally reached a city at 3:00 AM. There, I parked my bike on the grass at the park in the town center. For security, I tied my motorcycle wheel to my foot, crawled into my sleeping bag, and got two hours of rest.

You might be asking yourself, “Why didn't Tom use George's credit card to get a motel room?” Okay, I didn't want to take advantage of his kindness. Besides that, I had only planned to sleep for a few hours and hit the road again. If I didn't hurry, I'd miss registration. I never liked being late for anything.

Halfway across Montana, my bike's engine started missing. I stopped, removed the spark plug, and discovered a piece of carbon closing the gap and shorting it out. Using my pocketknife, I cleared the carbon, replaced the plug, and got back on the road.

I pushed myself to the limit: nineteen hours of driving on the first day, twenty-one on the second, and twenty-two on the third, to make it to Owatonna. When I finally arrived at 3:00 AM, the night guard let me sleep in the dorm on an empty bunk.

With no extra clothes—just what was on my back—I registered

for classes the next day. Even Dr. Cedarholm, the College president, noticed and asked if jeans and cowboy boots were all I owned.

“Sir,” I said, “my clothes are being shipped to me. They should arrive any day now.”

“I hope so, Son,” was his kind reply.

My first job in Owatonna was as a janitor at McKinley Elementary School. I rode my bike to work until it became too cold. Then, I stored my motorcycle in Dr. Richard Weeks’s garage, a faculty member, and waited for spring before riding again.

Starting wrestling season at 150 pounds, I knew I wasn’t good enough to compete with Dan Lindsey at 145 or Bob Bardwell at 137. If I wanted to make varsity, my only chance was to lose weight and challenge for the 130-pound spot. I knew I did not have the experience to win any matches above 145 pounds.

The challenge was that Jay Braccini, the team’s toughest wrestler, held the 130-pound spot. Even to challenge him, I needed to lose twenty pounds. During wrestling season, I skipped the dining hall and ate a dozen scrambled eggs daily, cooked at the snack bar. I stocked up on chocolate bars and kept fruit juices cold outside my window.

My break came when Jay had to step down for a semester. My new goal was to beat Dennis Hinds and Dave Leslie to get the varsity spot. I did that and was on the team!

In my first college match, I was pinned by Dale Hartle from Owatonna High School, who was wrestling for Rochester Junior College in Rochester, Minnesota. I pinned my next ten

CHAPTER 11

Camp Chetek

After school ended, I drove my VW bus to California with some students, who helped pay for the trip. Unfortunately, someone had set my motor valves at .004 mm instead of .008 mm. By the time I reached San Francisco, the motor was already scorched.

Driving back to Owatonna, I spotted a VW dealer in Rapid City, South Dakota, and decided to stop. I asked what they would give me for my bus toward a new 1967 VW Beetle. Their offer was \$250. They called Pillsbury Baptist Bible College to confirm my employment and steady income. The school's financial officer assured the dealer about my reliability and employment contract.

The new VW Beetle was \$1,300. My monthly installment was only fifty dollars, which I never had a problem paying. When I drove out of the dealership at noon, inhaling the new-car aroma, I praised the Lord for His goodness.

My job at Camp Chetek in Chetek, Wisconsin, was to serve as a counselor and drive the old camp truck to haul suitcases. I would follow the buses with the truck as they picked up campers. Each time the buses stopped, I loaded the campers' suitcases into the truck since there wasn't enough room for both them and their luggage on the bus.

I earned the nickname 'Sarge' by running my cabin like a military organization. Campers started as recruits and were promoted

daily if they cooperated and stayed out of trouble.

When I went back to Milwaukee, I stayed at different churches and spoke to their teen groups. One weekend, I was at Faith Baptist Church in Waukesha. The pastor was Glen Teasdale. I happened to be there for the church's annual picnic. I filled my plate, then spotted a young lady sitting alone at a table. I decided to join her. This was the best decision I made since becoming a Christian.

I sat across from the beautiful teenage girl, Penny Stimpson, and we began to talk. She learned I had attended Western Baptist Bible College (WBBC), where I had made friends with people she knew. Penny had moved from California to Wisconsin six months before I started at WBBC.

Meeting Penny left a strong impression on me. She was lovely, dedicated to Jesus, and wanted to be a missionary—an exciting discovery for me. She was planning to attend Grand Rapids School of Bible and Music in Michigan, while I would be returning to Pillsbury. As she walked away, I felt my heart break. However, when I next saw her as a camp counselor, I was overjoyed. We performed different skits—mine about Japan, hers about Brazil—and I was once again impressed.

To my delight, instead of going to Grand Rapids, Penny chose to study at PBBC. Back at Pillsbury, I started dating one of Penny's best friends. After a few dates, she told me, "Tom, there's no future in our relationship. You're determined to be a missionary, and I'm not willing to leave the United States. My Russian parents sacrificed a lot to get here, and I won't dishonor them by leaving." This left me disappointed again.

Penny's friend told her about our breakup. Penny would

CHAPTER 14

Arriving in Brazil

After buying a Collins KWM-2 ham radio and a 1000-watt power booster, I focused on getting my FCC Amateur Radio Service License. I studied every book I could find and traveled from Clare, Michigan, to Lansing to take a fifty-question test. I was allowed to miss six questions, but I had never studied six of the fifty questions.

“Lord, you know how hard I’ve studied,” I prayed. “I need to get five of these six questions right, or I’ll fail. Help me.” I went ‘Eeny Meeny Miny Moe’ on the multiple-choice test. I must have gotten five right because I passed. Thank You, Lord, for helping me.

The license required copying Morse code at 13 words per minute, which I practiced for 2 years. Although I could do it, nerves caused me to fail four times. With one week left before our flight to Brazil, I had one last chance. Again, I asked for help from above.

As I sat there anxiously waiting, the monitor said, “We’re going to give the twenty-one-word test first. Those taking the thirteen-word test can also participate.” This was the help I needed. I copied twenty-one words a minute. When I took my test, I wasn’t nervous, and I passed. Thank You, Lord, for helping me.

Highland Park Baptist Church in Saint Paul, Minnesota had

moved to Bryant Avenue in south Minneapolis. We started stockpiling our baggage at the unsold church building in St. Paul.

I packed our belongings into fourteen crates and twenty steel barrels. Afterwards, I found out the Brazilian Consulate required a detailed list of each item in every crate and barrel, so I repacked everything. Then, needing the serial numbers for every item that had one, I had to unpack, then repack a third time.

Bryant Avenue Baptist Church was selling the building, so I moved our crates and barrels to Mrs. Lillian Payne's garage in Owatonna, Minnesota.

We had a whole year to raise the rest of our support. We made a trip to the West Coast so my grandparents and mother could meet Kosy, our new daughter. After the required waiting period was up, we met with the judge and assured him we wanted to keep Kosy. The boys even voted "yes!"

Ready to leave for Brazil, we rented a Ryder truck and loaded our baggage with help from college students. A student commented, "I think the truck is over the weight limit. If it is, the weigh station will force you to leave items behind."

At the feed-weighing center, it turned out our baggage was overweight, as the student predicted. We removed 13 barrels, loaded 8 into a U-Haul trailer, and shipped the other 5 barrels separately to a New Orleans freight company.

In early October, our family climbed into the Ryder truck and drove to New Orleans. We were exhausted but excited to finally be on our way. As it turned out, the student was right about the weigh stations along the route; we were stopped five times.

CHAPTER 17

Strange Customs

Death and Burial Customs

Divaldmir and Grace had a baby who died eighteen days after being born. In Northeast Brazil, mothers do not attend their babies' burials. Children typically place the body in a shoebox with strings to carry it to the cemetery. We witnessed this several times.

Since Grace was absent and Divaldmir could not leave work, Penny and I took the baby's shoebox to the cemetery. The caretaker began digging the grave; during this, we were shocked to find a human skull in the dirt.

After the burial, Divaldmir arrived and asked me to speak. I referenced *2 Samuel 12:23* and noted biblical assurances of babies' safety in God's care. Later, Grace named her next daughter Susana, after Penny's Brazilian name, Susana.

As we left, a teenager challenged my teaching about the soul's destiny after death, offering to visit and discuss biblical interpretations.

I put my hand on his shoulder. "Son, I've had four years of Greek and two years of Hebrew language training, while studying the Bible formally for twelve years. I'll continue to believe what I know to be the truth."

A few months later, a Brazilian pastor across town called me. “Pastor Thomas,” he said, “an older man in our church passed away. We have only a paper coffin for burial. If we push it to the church in this rain, there will be nothing left of the coffin. Can you bring your VW bus to help us get the coffin to the church?”



*MOVING
A PAPER
COFFIN*

“Yes, I can do that.”

“Can you also bring your 35 mm camera?”

Upon arrival at the church, they removed the coffin’s lid and propped up the grandfather’s head so the grandchildren could take a final photo with him. Each grandchild put an arm around his neck for a touching picture. The reason for needing my camera became clear.

After I took all their pictures, one of the grandchildren asked me if I wanted my photo taken with Grandpa. I declined, telling them I hardly knew him. The family resettled the grandfather into the coffin and replaced the lid.

CHAPTER 21

Luzia and Dude

In October 1980, we left Mossoró for our first furlough. During that time, we switched mission boards and joined Baptist World Mission in Decatur, Alabama. During this furlough we lost 90% of our support, so we had to restart the deputation process. For the next two years, we traveled around the United States. In October 1983, we finally arrived in Rio Grande do Sul, Brazil's southernmost state.

We rented a missionary's house when we arrived, but he would return in four months. That meant we urgently needed to find a new place to live. Penny learned the government was offering a fifteen-year loan for new homeowners. I found a house being built just four blocks away. We secured the loan and became proud owners of a new home.

At that stage, I had been a Christian for twenty years and a missionary for nine. We had spent sixteen years following God's will. Despite all our efforts, our only earthly possession had been a car. Now we had a four-bedroom, three-bathroom house with a swimming pool, which delighted the kids.

Penny and I worked in Restinga, a city of 220,000 people that was only two miles wide. Our church building was small but well-located on the main thoroughfare.

Luzia

Six months into the pastorate of our second church, Luzia walked through the door. “I’m looking for the true church,” she said with a winning smile.

“This church teaches the Bible as we understand it,” I replied. “Maybe you’ve found the right church for you.”

I always get visitors’ names and addresses so I can visit them before the following Sunday. I did that for Luzia, but then lost her address. I prayed, “Lord, excuse my lack of organization. Please bring her back so I can learn where she lives.” She didn’t return the next Sunday, which made me quite frustrated with myself.

The following Sunday, to my amazement, Luzia returned to church. Penny and I visited her home. I explained the plan of salvation and asked if she would like to pray. She agreed, and we bowed our heads. She prayed silently for a long time, which didn’t bother me. I eventually asked if she was done. “No, I’m not finished yet,” she replied.

When she was done, Luzia looked up, smiled, and said, “Now, I’m finished.”

Very few times in my life have I seen such a quick and long-lasting conversion. Luzia worked on a computer at a hardware store. She also spent three hours a day on the bus, traveling back and forth to work. I was astonished to learn that during this time on the bus, she memorized whole chapters of the Bible.

I was visiting members in Restinga one day, where I let Shane ride my Honda dirt bike around town. A while later, I saw him

CHAPTER 22

Three Lathams at Pillsbury

Bob Anderson, a deacon at Bryant Avenue Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota, provided all the Accelerated Christian Education (ACE) curriculum materials we needed for our children. I moved Shane ahead in his studies so he could finish high school alongside Thomas. My plan was for both boys to complete their last year of high school together and begin as freshmen at Pillsbury College at the same time.

However, Thomas had other plans. He said, “I want to spend the summer living with the Ellsworths, in Minneapolis, and find a job. I can make enough to pay my own round-trip passage.” We supported his decision to leave Brazil. After two months, he asked if he could remain and graduate from Bryant’s ACE school. We agreed to this change.

Soon, Shane wanted a change, too. He said, “During my senior year, I want to attend a school that has soccer and wrestling.” We arranged for Quentin and Lana Freeburg, who had three children, to host Shane for the year. Their home was just a block from Woodcrest Baptist Church, one of our supporting churches in Minnesota.

Penny, Kosy, and I followed their activities with great interest. In March, we started our furlough. We planned to live in Owatonna so Penny could finish her education. We rented a five-bedroom house, one-half block from Pillsbury College.

I spoke at both of our sons' high school graduations. After that, Shane worked, and Thomas attended Army boot camp. Penny, Kosy, and I visited our supporting churches west of the Mississippi River. We asked Jodi Endicott, a friend's daughter, to go with us so Kosy would not have to sit in the back seat by herself.

Our last meeting was in Great Falls, Montana. When we returned to Owatonna, Penny got set up to start classes, while I went to Fort Benning, Georgia, to see Thomas graduate from boot camp.

After the ceremony, his drill sergeant put his hand on Thomas' shoulder and said to me, "Mr. Latham, your son is not only a good soldier; he's also an excellent Christian."

Another soldier piped up, "Hey, Sarge, I'm also a Christian."

The drill sergeant smirked, "I know a Christian when I see one. You're not a Christian, but Thomas certainly is." I felt sorry for the other soldier who had not impressed his drill sergeant, but I was busting my buttons about Thomas's Christian testimony.

Penny registered for classes as a sophomore. She planned to graduate in May. To do that, she had to finish ninety-two hours of academic credit. Thirty hours a year was considered a full load.

The reason Penny could take ninety-two credit hours in one year was her intelligence and resourcefulness. I haven't known anyone else who finished college in two years. Penny convinced two teachers to let her complete the required reading and take only the midterm and final exams, without attending classes.

CHAPTER 26

We've Been Robbed—Again!

The first time our family was robbed was when someone at the storehouse in Fortaleza used a hacksaw to cut open our metal barrel and stole a tape recorder and my Marty Robbins *Gunfighter Ballads*, a 78rpm record.

By December 2023, we had been robbed 114 times. Here, I will share the stories about five of those robberies. In three of the stories, the robber pointed a gun at my head.

Robbery One

One Sunday after church, someone from our congregation took Penny home. I stayed behind to drive the other members home in our 12-passenger van. When I finally got home, I pulled into the garage and went back to close the gate, locking it as I always did.

When I got to the porch, two teens with hoodies came around the corner and pointed a gun at my head, saying, “Don’t say a word or we’ll kill you.”

What they wanted me to do was to fall on my knees and beg for mercy. They planned to make me open the locked door; then they would enter the house and put the gun to Penny’s head. They would gather everything of value, put it in our van, and drive away.

That was never going to happen! I would have fought them to the death before I would have allowed them to put a gun to Penny's head. I knew that the front door was locked. Penny had heard what they said, so she ran to get my air rifle. She was not going to open the door.

I said, "I don't think you're going to rob me, because my neighbor has a shotgun." I ran to the gate and screamed, "Nelson, Nelson, I'm being robbed." (He's my friend across the road who has several weapons.)

Nelson came out with his gun. Three other neighbors also ran outside, shouting. The thieves, startled by this response, ran to the back of our property and disappeared into the woods. My reaction clearly unsettled them.

Robbery Two

The next day, I bought a pellet gun that closely resembled a real firearm. That evening, I had it in my car as we arrived home after dark. I got out to open the gate and was suddenly confronted by a large man. He was holding a gun and aimed a shaking hand at me. He stammered, "This ... This ... is ... a ... robbery." He appeared even more frightened than I was.

I screamed again, "Nelson, Nelson, robbery!" My neighbor came out, blasting his shotgun into the air. Other neighbors burst through their doors, brooms in hand.

The robber fled down the road toward a waiting car. I grabbed my air pistol and chased him, but I didn't shoot because I couldn't locate the safety button.

CHAPTER 29

Moving to Gravataí

Every Sunday, we drove three hours from Porto Alegre to our third church in Cachoeirinha. Deciding to settle closer, we bought an empty lot just 900 feet from the main highway to the mountain tourist cities. This spot offered easy bus access and a short walk for visitors.

During construction in March 1995, my brother Danny sent me a letter with only one sentence: “Tommy, before I die, I want you to know that I found God.” He passed away soon after. I still wonder about its meaning. Before my wife died in 2023, I asked her: “Penny, after you see Jesus, then your dad and sister, look for my Grandfather Taylor. He made a spiritual decision at church two weeks before he passed away. Then, look for my brother Danny.” She agreed.

We listed our Porto Alegre house for sale while I started building our new home, hoping to move soon. Selling took three years, but in June 1996, we moved to our partly finished house in Gravataí.

Following the moving truck, we arrived at the new house at 2 AM—with no front door installed. Penny and I slept on a mattress in the living room as stray dogs wandered by. The next day, we secured the front door, but our bedroom still had no windows installed. That night, cats climbed in and out through the gaps in the wall. Penny did not appreciate the feline presence.

We employed 15 men to finish the downstairs so we could move in and start our new life. Over time, we bought two more lots, creating a soccer field, volleyball court, and bocce-ball court.

A year later, we completed the second floor as a retreat center with 26 beds, three bathrooms, and a large game room. I made two of the games in the room. The space hosted many retreats and overnights, including one where eighty women attended a chocolate retreat, with some sleeping upstairs and others camping outside.

I built a two-story playground, 8 feet wide by 78 feet long, filled with equipment to attract children and public schools to our property. One day, we hosted 200 students from a public school. I shared my salvation story and distributed Chick tracts.

As missionaries, Penny and I understood our work was a lifelong commitment. My doctoral thesis, *Missionary Problem Areas*, examined six main reasons missionaries quit and return home.

During fifty years of ministry, we faced seven major crises, any of which could have led us to quit. Fellow believers and missionaries caused most of them.

We endured these challenges by never blaming God for the faults of His followers. We understood that people acted carnally due to Satan, not God. Satan opposes God's work of saving souls.

Another key to staying on the mission field was embracing the country, even though its language, customs, and thinking were unfamiliar. We admired James Hudson Taylor, who adopted local Chinese dress as a missionary.

Speaking Portuguese with an American accent was sometimes

CHAPTER 31

Freestyle Wrestling Ministry

My passions have been in this order:

- 1) Christ,
- 2) Penny,
- 3) family,
- 4) ministry, and
- 5) freestyle wrestling.

I loved my wrestling years at Pillsbury Baptist Bible College, where Penny was my most avid fan. Our team won the conference title every year.

I had always wanted to start a wrestling ministry in Brazil, but the standard three-piece mat was too expensive and too heavy to move. Then, at an event, Penny and I saw a mat made of smaller three-foot-by-six-foot sections that fit together like a puzzle.

Seeing the puzzle mat made us realize a wrestling ministry was possible. I ordered fifty sections for \$3,000 and had a trailer built to carry the mat behind our van. We packed the mat sections inside and made space in front for a bag of singlets. (A singlet is a wrestler's uniform.) Our van also helped us transport



wrestlers and assistant coaches.

We got permission to wrestle at the public school, but we could only do it at 5:00 PM, after school was out, and the students were going home. To participate, the students had to stay until 6:00 PM.

Each time we started, about forty to fifty students joined. Over time, this number dropped to only five to eight wrestlers. We couldn't continue with so few participants, so we moved to new schools when needed. Thankfully, we had enough schools to keep the program running for twenty years.

At one point, we held wrestling in schools every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday. At first, only boys participated. I didn't have singlets yet, so I asked a neighbor to sew uniforms using the Minnesota Gophers' colors, maroon and gold.

When I advertised in *Amateur Wrestling News* for donations of wrestling singlets, I received them from all over the USA. We ended up with over three hundred singlets, including some from the high school in Owatonna, Minnesota.

On tournament Saturdays, I would rent a bus to stop at all four schools, pick up students, and take them to the church. We had huge turnouts, including wrestlers from five other teams in our state. Some great wrestlers, who had competed in tournaments in Rio de Janeiro, gave our program credibility.

In twenty years, we went to eighteen public schools. Finally, Geronimo, a school only three blocks from the church, allowed us to train during school hours. We would pick up helpers and arrive at the school at 3:00 PM.

CHAPTER 35

Public School Things

We provided various activities for the public school near our house, such as drama presentations, wrestling, puppets, and trampoline sessions. The schoolchildren would walk over to use our large activity space, spending the whole day with us and even preparing a barbecue to share.

One Thanksgiving, Sandra, the school principal, called and said, “Thomas, come to the school and celebrate Thanksgiving with us.” Although Thanksgiving appears on Brazil’s calendar, it isn’t celebrated, so I was curious about what they had planned.

When I got to the school, they sat me in a chair and called all the students to surround me. Then, Sandra said, “We’re going to celebrate Thanksgiving, Pastor Thomas. Students, are you ready?”

The students replied that they were ready. Sandra then counted, “Okay—one, two, three!” and the entire school said in unison, “THANK YOU, GOD, FOR PASTOR THOMAS.” I was unprepared for this surprise. My eyes filled with tears of joy.

Later, Principal Sandra approached me with a concern: “Pastor Thomas, we’re having a lot of trouble with discipline at school. Can you talk to our parents about how to raise obedient children?” For comparison, such a request would be unheard of in the United States, where a public school principal asks

a pastor to teach parents how to raise respectful and obedient children!

I expected around ten parents, but more than seventy arrived, filling the small room. I gave a PowerPoint presentation on raising children with love, discipline, and example. “Don’t waste time telling your children not to use drugs,” I told them, “if you smoke anything yourself. You must set a good example.”



That one meeting led to more than forty people coming to our church. It’s important to remember the idea for this meeting came from the school’s principal. Also, the initial connection to the school began with donuts, an idea of Penny’s.

Later, Lea Beatriz, another school principal, asked me to help with a student who was also one of my wrestlers and needed an attitude adjustment. When I arrived, he was sitting on a chair grinning, appearing quite smug.

I leaned in close and asked him, “Have you ever seen someone carrying a one-hundred-pound sack of cement on their head? I’ve seen some carry three sacks at once.”

He replied that he had also seen men carrying three sacks of cement. Then, the boy said, “So what?”

I continued, “If you get expelled, that might be the only job

CHAPTER 40

Our House Was a Zoo

In Mossoró, Penny was going to shower our young daughter. When Mom slid the shower door open and tried to push Kosy inside, the four-year-old backed up and said, “Cooooobo!”

Penny thought Kosy meant the water was cold, but she hadn’t turned it on yet. How could it be cold? Still, Mom tried once more to get her daughter into the shower.

Kosette repeated herself. Then, Penny remembered Kosy didn’t speak English. If Kosy wasn’t saying ‘cold,’ what was she saying? Penny thought about the sounds—Cooold, coolbo, cobra. She realized Kosy was saying ‘COBRA!’ (*Portugese word for snake.*)

Penny checked the shower and found a snake scrunched up against the wall. Since I was not home, she called our sons, Tom and Shane, for help. We guessed the snake might have come inside the clothes basket we kept at the back of the house.

Another time, before our furlough, Shane and his wife, Erin, stayed in our house. They slept in the laundry room, since our second floor wasn’t finished. One day, I noticed a giant toad under their high-rise bed. “Erin,” I asked, “aren’t you afraid of that toad?”

“Not really. Remember, I’m from Montana. If the toad is under the bed, we won’t have problems with roaches or mosquitoes.”

I loved this daughter-in-law and still do.

In Fortaleza, our bedroom had only one bed and nothing else. One night, while I was half asleep, I felt something run across my chest. Penny said, “Find it, or I’m not sleeping here tonight.” I had an idea of what it could be.

We had some built-in closets. Inside one of the closets was a canister-type vacuum cleaner. The next day, I asked our housemaid, “Do you suppose a mouse is living in that vacuum?”

“It could go up the rubber hose,” she suggested.

“Okay, when I take off the lid, the little mice might run all over the place. But, as you can see, there’s nowhere for them to hide. Can you stomp them out?”

She took off her shoes and put them on her hands, like mittens. Kneeling by the vacuum cleaner, she said, “I’m ready.”

When the mice came out, they headed for cover in all directions. She began decimating them. Then, her shoes flew off her hands. The maid kept swatting the little mice with her bare hands, sending them to “The Great Cheese Picnic in the Sky”!

Later, our maid said, “I hate those loathsome critters so much, I would kill them all with my bare hands.” And she did, too.

Penny and I were sitting on the bed in our home in Gravataí, when I spotted a tarantula, as big as my hand, come meandering out from under our bed—like it owned the place. “Penny, close your eyes, and I’ll help you get out of the room.”

“Why? What is it?”

CHAPTER 42

Eulogy for Penny Sue Latham

After I accepted Christ on May 6, 1964, the first book I read was *Through Gates of Splendor*, by Elisabeth Elliot, published in 1957. The book is about five missionaries who were killed by the Aucas in Ecuador.

The second book I read was *In His Steps: What would Jesus do?*, by Charles Monroe Sheldon, published in 1896. The book emphasized making every decision based on what would Jesus do. It was the first appearance of the WWJD idea.

Reading both of these books inspired me to look for a Christian wife willing to follow Jesus anywhere. I wanted to become a missionary and commit for a lifetime.

In the summer of 1966, while working as a counselor at Camp Chetek in Wisconsin, I attended a church picnic in Waukesha. After getting my food, I noticed a young lady sitting alone and chose to join her. Next to becoming a Christian, this was the best decision I ever made.

As I sat across from this beautiful teenage girl, we started a conversation and quickly realized we knew some of the same people. I had attended Western Baptist Bible College (WBBC) in El Cerrito, California, and Penny also had connections there. She had moved from California to Wisconsin six months before I started at WBBC.

I was deeply impressed by her beauty and dedication to Jesus—she also wanted to be a missionary. Meeting her felt like finding gold. However, we faced a challenge: she planned to attend Grand Rapids School of Bible and Music in Michigan, while I would return to Pillsbury Baptist Bible College in Owatonna, Minnesota. As I watched her leave, I felt back at square one.

To my surprise, Penny showed up as a counselor at Camp Chetek. I grew even more impressed. During that time, I performed a skit about Japan, while she performed one about Brazil.

When I returned to Pillsbury, I began dating one of Penny's close friends from Wisconsin. She soon told me, "Tom, there's no future for us. You're set on being a missionary, but I won't leave the U.S. My Russian parents sacrificed too much for me to leave." Once again, my hopes for a relationship were dashed.

Penny's friend told her about our conversation. Penny told me later she immediately wanted me to ask her out, as she saw we were heading in the same direction. When I finally did, she agreed to go out with me.

After our first date, we both knew the search for a lifetime partner was over. We were married as soon as possible after the school year ended in June 1968.

I finished college and spent four years at Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In 1973, we were appointed as missionaries to Brazil. If you knew how utterly abhorred Penny was of any crawling creature, you might find it difficult to believe she would be willing to live in a country overrun with such critters. That showed her level of dedication. She encountered tarantulas bigger than my hand, snakes in the shower, and tiny frogs that jumped on her back while she was taking a shower. Allergies were her big problem in Northeast Brazil. When they hit, she was bedridden for days.

In 1983, we moved to the southernmost state. Over our fifty years as missionaries, we started four churches: one in the Northeast and three in Southern Brazil. Through her compassion and generosity, Penny made a lasting impact on those she served. Our churches' families deeply loved her.

She had more than 40 surgeries over the last 60 years. I have had the honor of being by her side for fifty-five years. She made our family life a wonderful experience with her creativity. Back in 1979, she even planned a circus for the kids when they were bored. Our house is filled with her art projects.

While she was in the fight of her life against aggressive breast cancer, she still studied for her women's meetings at church. Penny always surprised me with her ideas, energy, and dedication. Her love for Jesus was always evident during our many years together.

Penny was so lovely in all her ways. I was the luckiest wrestler in the world to have married her. When we got married, I felt like I had won history's biggest prize.

If you knew who I was before Christ picked me up out of the ditch, you would understand how utterly elated I was to have such a lovely and wonderful person choose me. Four men had asked her to marry them, but she held out for someone who loved the Lord first and always, and was dead set on being a missionary until the end of life.

Penny dedicated our married life to supporting my happiness and well-being, her love for Jesus guiding her actions. The love we shared was a profound gift. Anyone who knew her could see the depth and authenticity of her character and our bond.

On April 30, 2023, we knew Penny had no more than a few days

left. She did not want to prolong the suffering, so she took off the oxygen mask. She whispered, “Let me go to Jesus.”

“Kosy is on her way,” I said. “Do you want to see her one more time?” She could hardly talk. “If you want to, just nod your head,” I said. She nodded.

We needed to keep the mask on so Kosy could have a final visit, too. Kosy arrived fifteen hours later and spoke to her loving mother for the last time. Everyone gathered around as Penny took her last breath on May 1, 2023. She crossed over the Jordan to be with her Savior, whom she had loved and obeyed for sixty years.

She desired to leave her missionary work and go directly to glory. She accomplished this. She now has the answers to the questions we are still struggling with.

I know we’ll see her again. What a glorious reunion that will be!



This is the final photo of Penny Sue Latham.

Author Biography

Dr. Tom Latham



**GENERAL QUARTERS
DRILL**

Tom Latham became a Christian while serving in the U.S. Navy, where he began holding *Protestant Divine Services* whenever his ship was at sea. After completing his naval service, he spent the next four years at bible college to further his spiritual journey. He achieved a significant milestone in his studies by earning a

Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree from Luther Rice Seminary.

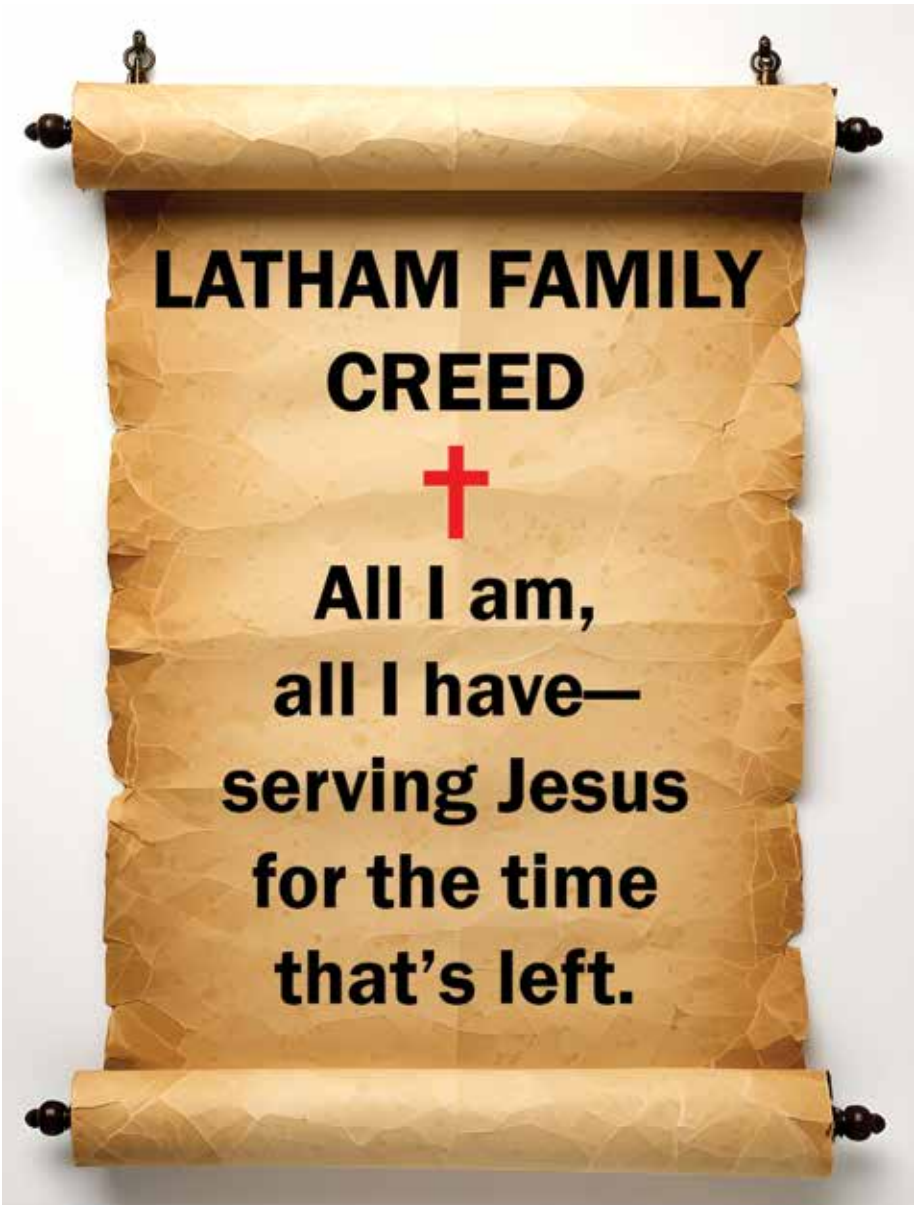
Tom met Penny Stimpson, and together they began a mission to serve God in Brazil. Their family grew to include three children, six grandchildren, and ten great-grandchildren.



PREACHING AS A GAUCHO

Although Penny was promoted to glory, Tom continues to serve Christ in Brazil.

To read more details about Dr. Latham's educational journey, visit www.brazilwrestler.com.



Acknowledgments and Thanks

I acknowledge Jesus Christ, my Savior. Without His guidance and grace lifting me from a spiritual ditch, this book would not exist. I owe Him more than I can ever repay.

I thank my three children, Thomas, Shane, and Kosette, for making life an adventure as we faced the challenges and joys of the mission field in Brazil. Their companionship gave us more experiences than those in my more than 70 manuscripts, which may eventually become published books.

I thank Bob Cundiff, PhD, for his professional editorial and proofreading assistance. Bob resides in Clearwater, Florida. He teaches communication at St. Petersburg College and has edited or co-edited three other books. Bob is a published and produced playwright, a voiceover artist, and a member of The Gideons International.

I thank June May Harness for her many hours of proofreading my writing. June resides in New Port Richey, Florida. She worked with Bob Cundiff on the book *Legacy of the Mat*, by Jim Hazewinkel. She is a retired schoolteacher and the widow of Rev. Clytee Harness. She has two children and seven grandchildren.

I also thank Dave Carlson, owner of DynoTech Publishing, a proper 'jack of all trades' and 'master of many,' for his invaluable contribution to the publishing process. His tremendous efforts

far exceeded what I could have accomplished alone, and I am deeply grateful. Dave, a brother wrestler who resides in Colorado Springs, Colorado, stays busy during retirement with consulting projects related to computer technology, computer-aided illustration, book editing, and publishing.

“Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”

Ephesians 5:20

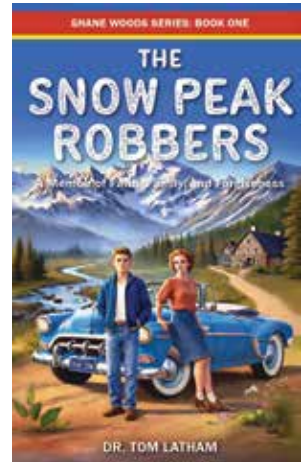
More Books by Dr. Tom Latham
SHANE WOODS SERIES

Book One: *The Snow Peak Robbers*
ISBN 978-1-885708-51-9

Book Two: *The Strawberry Fair*
ISBN 978-1-885708-52-6

Book Three: *The Buzzard Butte Poachers*
ISBN 978-1-885708-53-3

Book Four: *The Eastern Rodeo*
ISBN 978-1-885708-54-0



Future books in the series will depend on reader interest. More book sales may motivate me to publish more of my existing 15+ manuscripts in this series.

INTO THE LIGHT

This inspiring autobiography chronicles the life and ministry of Dr. Latham and his late wife, Penny, as missionaries in Brazil for more than 50 years. It details their journey from humble beginnings, transformative encounters with Christ, and their unwavering dedication to spreading the Gospel through church planting, innovative ministries, and personal relationships.



Perseverance and dedication over more than half a century in Brazil highlight their unwavering commitment to serving Christ. If you seek true stories of Christian perseverance, unique adventures, and cultural adaptation, this book is for you.



Dr. Tom Latham

www.brazilwrestler.com

***All I am, all I have —
serving Jesus
for the time that's left.***

ISBN 978-1-885708-18-2



9 781885 708182