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PART ONE

THE MAKING OF A STAR

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DIXON

There was the life that has shaped my body and mind for all the years to come after.

Ronald Reagan

One thing I do know – all the hours in the old church in Dixon (which I didn't appreciate at the time) and all of Nelle's faith have come together in a kind of inheritance without which I'd be lost and helpless.

Ronald Reagan to the Reverend and
Mrs. Ben H. Cleaver, 1973

Although it was almost midnight when the train pulled into the Frisco Depot in Springfield, Missouri, in early June 1952, more than seven hundred people were waiting to see the star of a new film called *The Winning Team*. The movie was about the baseball pitcher Grover Cleveland Alexander and was the last motion picture Ronald Reagan made for the Warner Bros. studio. From the back of a railway car Reagan and his new wife, actress Nancy Davis, smiled and waved, obviously pleased with the reception.

At forty-one, Reagan, while no longer a matinee idol, was still youthful enough to play an athlete on screen. In real life he was amiable and charming, and he possessed an ability to make people feel comfortable in his presence. He had an "easy-going, neighborly way about him," a Springfield newspaper reported. He and his wife seemed like "regular folk" – gracious, friendly, eager to please.¹

It was unusual for Hollywood films to premiere in Springfield and for movie stars to visit there, but a more famous figure upstaged the Reagans. President Harry S Truman arrived the following afternoon for a reunion with the 35th Infantry Division, the unit in which he had served during World War I. When the president's plane landed at the airport, between five thousand and ten thousand people met him, and as he drove into the city another hundred thousand lined the streets shouting, "We want you again!"²

Reagan and Truman were not strangers. During the 1948 campaign the actor had tried to mobilize Hollywood for the president, introducing him at a rally in Los Angeles. More than a year later, as head of the Screen Actors Guild, he had met with Truman in the White House. Three years after that, in Springfield, he played master of ceremonies at the President's Ball.

However, things were different in 1952. The president's popularity had declined as casualties mounted in Korea. He would not seek reelection. Reagan, for his part, would not have supported Truman had he run. He had moved away from New Deal liberalism toward the Republican Party's candidate, Dwight D. Eisenhower.³ By this time Reagan had become a political figure in his own right. He was a formidable speaker, and friends were encouraging him to run for office.

In 1952, though, hardly anyone could have predicted that Reagan would one day occupy the White House. As an actor he belonged to a group of people considered by many Americans to be less than admirable. Reagan himself had echoed the truism, only a month before coming to Springfield, that less than a generation earlier people in his profession "could not even be buried in the churchyard."⁴ He was sensitive to charges that actors were not respectable. Part of his work as president of the Screen Actors Guild amounted to defending the acting profession. "We're all from places like Illinois and Indiana and Missouri," he told an audience in Springfield, "and we're trying to be good citizens."⁵

Truman was now skeptical of Reagan. Reagan's marriage to actress Jane Wyman had recently ended in divorce. He had remarried only three months before, and his new wife was more than three months pregnant. The Trumans kept the Reagans at arm's length. The president had been scheduled to attend a private showing of *The Winning Team* but skipped the film to receive visitors at his hotel. He considered inviting the Reagans for dinner but after some thought concluded that he did not want any "Hollywood riffraff."⁶

The Springfield episode is interesting. That the president would dismiss the Reagans so casually, and that Reagan himself felt defensive about his profession suggest that an important change occurred between then and our own time in the level of respect accorded entertainers. Reagan helped bring about this change in attitude. The union between the entertainment industry and political power, of course, reached its peak during his presidency less than three decades later. Truman underestimated Reagan, especially if he assumed that the actor was like many other performers – long on personality but short on character. Reagan did not fit this stereotype. To understand why, it is first helpful to examine his Midwestern origins.



Ronald Wilson Reagan was born on February 6, 1911, in a little Illinois locality named Tampico, the heart of that state's farm country. Its business

district comprised a single block of buildings where farmers came to buy supplies and store grain in the elevator between two railroad lines. His father, Jack, managed the general store across from the elevator. Tampico was a typical Midwestern small town. Dutch (as a boy Ronald had asked family and friends to call him Dutch because he thought it more masculine than Ronald) and his brother, Neil (friends called him Moon), played on a Civil War cannon in the park and competed to see who could stay on the monument longest.⁷

But Dixon, Illinois, was where Ronald Reagan grew up. With a population of ten thousand, it was several times larger than Tampico and seemed like a city. The future president was nine when the family moved to 816 Hennepin Avenue. He lived in Dixon twelve years. “There was the life that has shaped my body and mind for all the years to come after,” he later wrote. “Going on reading binges in the public library or in the park. Waiting and hoping for the winter freeze without snow so that we could go skating on the Rock River – a rink two hundred yards wide and endlessly long, as clear and smooth as glass – the trick of skating for miles against the wind and then spreading the coat and for the pleasure of letting the wind blow you back.” Then “the long thoughts of spring, the pain with the coloring of the falling leaves in the autumn.”⁸

It was a time when after sunset there was not much to do. The radio was a novelty. Virtually every evening except when the family attended movies, Reagan’s mother read aloud at the kitchen table, flanked by her sons, with a pan of buttered popcorn between them (there was also a supply of apples and salted crackers). His father perused a newspaper at the other end. Nelle Reagan traced each line of the book so the children could follow. Before her younger son entered first grade at age five, he could recognize enough words to read a newspaper.⁹

On December 27, 1920, the boy obtained card 3695 at the public library, which entitled him to check out books. He recalled visiting this “house of magic” once or twice a week, by foot after dinner, down Hennepin Avenue, past South Central School, up the hill. When the family moved across the river, he crossed the Galena Avenue bridge and walked through town. He remembered his reading as largely undisciplined but focused on “heroes who lived by standards of morality and fair play.” Whenever he discovered a hero he liked, he read everything he could about him. Such stories left him with an “abiding belief in the triumph of good over evil.”¹⁰

He discovered *King Arthur* and knights in armor and liked the Rover Boys. Later a book entitled *Northern Trails* instilled awareness of nature and wildlife. When he played football he read *Frank Merriwell at Yale*. He was fascinated not only by Edgar Rice Burroughs’s *Tarzan* novels but also by Burroughs’s science fiction, such as *John Carter: Warlord of Mars* and other tales about Carter’s travels. Then came a period in which he enjoyed Zane Grey as well as *Sherlock Holmes*, *Horatio Alger*, *The Count of Monte Cristo*,

Last of the Mohicans, and *The Printer of Udell*. The latter work impressed him when he was eleven or twelve because of the qualities of the main character, and was influential in his decision to join the Christian Church.¹¹

Reading was not confined to books. The *Evening Telegraph* provided a window on national and international events. The paper offered but a narrow opening controlled by publisher B. F. Shaw.

To a latter-day reader the *Evening Telegraph* affords an interesting view of life in Dixon. It publicized such heroes as Charles A. Lindbergh. As a teenager, Reagan followed the aviator's exploits from the time of the take-off for Paris in May 1927. Lindbergh flew over Dixon in the *Spirit of St. Louis* a few months later, in August (the Chamber of Commerce had invited him to pass over on his way to Milwaukee). When he arrived he pitched out an orange sack, retrieved by a nine-year-old in the huge crowd below, that contained a message that the Dixon Trust & Savings Bank posted in its window. It called for an expansion of commercial aviation, urging air mail service and airports. If these recommendations were followed, it promised, the United States would thus take "its rightful place . . . as the world leader in commercial flying."¹²

The *Evening Telegraph* chronicled Lindbergh's activities thereafter. Early in 1928, Dixon residents posted two thousand letters to be carried by the Lone Eagle. Lindbergh figured prominently in Reagan's high school graduation ceremony, where a speaker talked about "Making Dreams Come True" and described the hero as the kind of dreamer who had attracted worldwide attention.¹³

Interestingly, in little more than a dozen years Dixon would give Reagan himself a hero's reception that rivaled that of Lindbergh, one given detailed coverage by the *Evening Telegraph*. Reagan would return as a movie star in the role of a pilot, his picture displayed in advertising with those of Lindbergh and other aviation heroes. Moreover, during World War II, he would promote a crusade for flying similar to Lindbergh's.

The *Evening Telegraph* became a medium through which businessmen promoted the city and free enterprise. If its pages were any indication, city leaders placed their faith in such boosterism. Shaw and assistants also endorsed such views. During Reagan's years in high school the *Evening Telegraph* revealed faith in progress, democracy, technology, mobility, patriotism, and corporate growth. Misgivings that corporatism, factory life, and concentrated capital might erode liberty seemed out of place. This was "An Age of Hope," an editorial proclaimed, refuting Clarence Darrow, who had said wealth destroyed liberty. Americans were "erecting an entirely new civilization" that had "completely reversed some of the most fundamental tenets of all other cultures." They were building a culture that was unlike "any culture that ever appeared before." This new society sought the "removal from the path of every man of every material discomfort that science or machinery can conquer." This "revolution" had not been perfected, but

the average working man in America had more comforts than the wealthy man of only a generation earlier. This era was neither a time when the “vision of spiritual freedom” would be lost nor an age for Darrow’s pessimism. Americans stood at the dawn of a new era that could not be “measured by the old yard-sticks. . . . The gleaming skyscrapers of our great cities are symbolic of the shining white cities of brotherhood for which we are even now laying the foundations.”¹⁴

Other experiences filled Reagan’s early life. His passion was sports. At eleven he was a drum major in the boys’ band. Poor eyesight made baseball difficult and left “feelings of inferiority and lack of self-confidence,” he recalled. “I was always the last chosen for a side in any game.” Football captured Reagan’s interest. By the time he reached high school he was eager but small – 5’3” and 108 pounds. He played in a division for smaller players at first. But by his senior year he had grown to 151 pounds and kicked off for the varsity, earning a letter wearing jersey number 33.¹⁵

In Dixon, as in other such communities, football was more than a game; it offered lessons in living. The gospel of sports as a developer of character and citizenship – a theme of one of Reagan’s best-known films, *Knute Rockne – All American* (1940) – was part of the Dixon experience. During his senior year the squad won only two games. Dixon lost its opener to Mendota, 25 to 0. Things went from bad to worse the following week when the Rock Falls team “romped through the line almost at will,” running up thirty-eight points against Dixon in what the *Evening Telegraph* called one of the “poorest” games played on the local field in two years. On Thanksgiving Day the team lost 34 to 0 to the league champions, Sterling High. Before the Sterling game the Kiwanis Club invited the squad to lunch to hear an inspirational speaker, a former captain of the 1910 Cornell University team who had become an attorney in a nearby community. Fred Gardner spoke about sportsmanship and athletics, and declared that high school and college football offered the best-known way for building Americans. Training under qualified coaches would do more for their later lives, he said, than any course in Latin or Greek.¹⁶

Reagan came to see many virtues in football, and generally in sports, not least of which was that they served to combat racial prejudice. “I can’t help but point out my conviction,” he said in 1965, “that among the extremists you’ll find no one who ever participated in athletics on a team that numbered among its personnel both Negroes and whites.” His home life reinforced this idea. When his mother entertained the team in her house, a black player on the squad, Wink McReynolds, was always included. During Reagan’s last year at Eureka College the football team came to Dixon, where it practiced and stayed the evening. When the local hotel owner refused to house the team’s two black players – starting center Franklin Burkhardt and reserve tackle Jim Rattan – Reagan’s parents put them up.¹⁷

If Reagan was almost too small for football, he did excel as a swimmer.

When Dixon held its first annual water carnival on Labor Day, 1928, he won the 220-yard river swim. More important than any competitive feat, though, was the stature he achieved as a lifeguard at nearby Lowell Park. In this respect the *Evening Telegraph* helped to make Reagan a hometown hero by reporting his exploits as a lifeguard (as it later related his successes as an announcer and movie actor). On the evening of August 2, 1928, he pulled a local man from the “jaws of death” to record his twenty-fifth save. His fifty-first save came in June 1931, his seventy-first in July 1932.¹⁸



The values that Ronald Reagan later took into the American presidency came from many sources, as do values that all people use to order their lives, but it does seem clear that they derived in important ways from two individuals. One was the future president’s mother, Nelle. The other was the minister of the First Christian Church in Dixon, the Reverend Ben Hill Cleaver.¹⁹

As for the importance of Reagan’s mother, Nelle, there hardly can be any doubt. The later president’s adopted son Michael has recalled how Nelle “instilled a Christian attitude in the entire family.” She assumed the responsibility for Ronald’s religious training, taking him first to Sunday school, and when he was older, to the adult services. “I was raised to believe that God has a plan for everyone and that seemingly random twists of fate are all part of His plan,” Reagan reminisced. “From my mother, I learned the value of prayer.”²⁰

Ronald and his brother Neil were baptized in 1922. Their baptisms were among the first performed in the church’s building, dedicated three days earlier. Whereas Neil later joined Dixon’s Catholic church and removed his name from First Christian’s rolls, Ronald retained membership until he transferred it to the Hollywood–Beverly Christian Church in 1940.²¹

Nelle Wilson Reagan was born near Morrison in northwestern Illinois in 1884, and met Jack Reagan in nearby Fulton, Missouri. In 1904 the two married in the town’s Catholic church. Jack was not nearly as serious about religion, and attended mass irregularly. For Nelle, religion was indispensable, and on Easter Sunday, 1910, she became a member of the Church of Christ in Tampico, where the Reagans then were living. After several years and a series of moves to Chicago, Galesburg, and Monmouth, they returned to Tampico, and thence to Dixon.²²

When the family moved to Dixon, Nelle became quite active in the church. She believed in tithing and “could even put it on an almost selfish basis,” her son recalled, “by guaranteeing that the Lord would make your 90 per cent twice as big if you made sure He got His tenth.” The Reagan family income in the mid- and late 1920s was meager.²³ She made her contribution in other ways. For eighteen years she taught the True Blue Class in Sunday school, made up of twenty-five adult women. She was song director for the choir. She belonged to the Women’s Missionary Society and headed the committee on

missions. She revealed talent as a dramatic reader and gave readings to church groups in Dixon. She was a leader in convincing the congregation to build a parsonage for the Cleavers.²⁴

To friends Nelle was “a lovely woman who gave of herself in service to others,” surely “a practicing Christian if ever there was one.” She was small in stature, had blue eyes, and was soft-spoken. Church members recalled her as cheerful and kind. Where her husband Jack was a skeptic, she was an optimist who considered people essentially good. From Nelle, her son Ronald learned “how to have dreams and believe I could make them come true.”²⁵

Nelle Reagan’s Christian charity extended to the community; she visited hospital patients and prisoners in the local jail. On at least one occasion after she followed her son to Hollywood, she wrote the White House asking Eleanor Roosevelt to intervene on behalf of an Illinois man who sought treatment at Warm Springs, Georgia. In California she made a point of calling on patients at an impoverished tuberculosis sanitarium, bringing celebrities, together with movies supplied by her son. “I’m no society lady,” she explained. “I don’t spend my time at social gatherings, my time is devoted to God’s work.”²⁶

Reagan’s early training in religion was a testimony to the influence of his mother, to be sure, and also to that of his minister, Ben Cleaver. Reagan met Cleaver almost as soon as his family came to Dixon from Tampico in 1921. An attraction developed between the youthful Ronald and Cleaver’s daughter. Margaret (Mugs) Cleaver was by all accounts witty, intelligent, and altogether delightful. According to her sister Helen, Dutch fell head over heels – a “genuine attraction” that lasted until 1934. “I was sure,” Reagan wrote afterward, “she was going to be my wife.” In the end, though, Margaret returned his engagement ring. Because of Mugs, Dutch found himself in proximity to Ben Cleaver, and in many ways the minister became a second father. “He was as close to being a ‘minister’s kid’ as one can be without actually moving into the rectory,” one of Reagan’s biographers has written. “Naturally, he was *often* in our home,” Helen remembered, “and felt the influence of father’s guidance during those formative years.” Cleaver advised him, helped get him into college, even taught him how to drive a car. Years later Reagan acknowledged his debt. “You were all so much a part of my life and had so much to do with charting my course,” he wrote Helen after her father’s death in 1975.²⁷

Cleaver found the Christian Church, the denomination in which Reagan grew up, made to his liking. Known also as the Disciples of Christ, it traced its beliefs to the years after the American Revolution and to the leadership of Thomas and Alexander Campbell. Members followed the teachings of the New Testament. The denomination originated in rural America and flourished on the frontier. When Cleaver began his ministry, almost all the membership was in small communities in the South and Middle West; more than

half the members lived in Kentucky, Illinois, Ohio, and Indiana. Membership was strong in Tennessee, Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, and Texas, as well.²⁸ The Dixon Christian Church opened communion to “all believers in Christ” and sought to keep services simple and understandable. It tried to foster an “undenominational spirit” that encouraged fellowship with other Christian groups.²⁹

When Cleaver (he had been named after the Georgia senator, Ben Hill) entered the ministry, the Disciples reflected the beliefs of pioneers, Anglo-Saxons who lived in the Midwest and South. They shared views held by many other Americans at the turn of the century – belief in Providence, faith in progress, a nationalistic spirit that equated the country’s interests with God’s will and occasionally explained America’s mission in millennialistic terms. They believed in Anglo-Saxon superiority. They revered farmers and laborers and were against big cities and the immoral people who lived there.³⁰

Although some followers warned about the dangers of affluence, most shared a desire for money and believed that hard work combined with Christian honesty would bring it. Many of them admired the wealthy and courted businessmen, who often became influential members of the church. Most felt comfortable with *laissez-faire* capitalism.³¹

Like many Disciples, Cleaver feared urban secularism. This did not mean that he was provincial. He could read Hebrew and classical Greek, and he briefly attended the University of Chicago, although he apparently disagreed with the church’s “liberal element” there.³² Nevertheless, he appears to have accepted the Disciples’ comparatively liberal understanding of human nature, sin, and redemption. Although believing people sinful and in need of salvation, the Disciples did not accept the view that original sin had totally corrupted human nature. Free will and intelligence enabled a person to gain grace.³³

Cleaver preferred a small church in a rural setting. He thought the impersonalization of large city churches undermined Christianity. Religion depended on a strong relation between the local pastor and his congregation.³⁴ When he assumed the Dixon ministry at age forty-one, he had been a pastor for more than eighteen years in small communities in Missouri and Illinois, and Dixon was his tenth church. He remained in Dixon almost nine years, longer than any of his predecessors, finally resigning to take a church in Eureka, Illinois, where he served from 1931 to 1935.³⁵

At first he had problems in Dixon. He was not a good speaker and he worried that he could not inspire the young. Some members thought him “too intellectual.” He overcame such shortcomings, however, and was remembered as a superb organizer who was hard-working, conscientious, and well liked. The congregation held him in special regard because of his dedication. When the janitor became ill, he took over the duties. When the Great

Depression made it impossible for the church to meet its budget, he insisted the debt be retired first and he be paid last.³⁶



The church of Reagan's youth joined religion with social and political issues, and here lay a source of some of the future president's ideas. The brotherhood of man was part of the First Christian Church's creed, and Nelle Reagan took the notion to heart. In early 1928 she read to her Dixon Sunday school class an essay about black Christians that she entitled "Negro Disciples and Their Contribution." She was "absolutely color blind when it came to racial matters," Reagan recalled. Her motto was "Judge everyone by how they act, not what they are."³⁷

In this regard, Nelle was "way ahead of her time." At least a few members of the Dixon congregation belonged to the Ku Klux Klan and one of Reagan's contemporaries remembered parades and burning crosses. For the most part the Dixon Klansmen were against Catholics. Only a few blacks lived in Dixon during the 1920s and none attended the Christian Church. Few Disciples had given up the idea of black inferiority.³⁸ Moreover, belief in Anglo-Saxon superiority was an ingredient in the Disciples' zeal to spread Christianity. Dixon church members heard about the work of missionaries with "the warring tribes of the wild country of Africa," and about "the strange customs of a heathen people."³⁹

Cleaver's racial attitudes during this period were of restrained sympathy. His family had come from Kentucky and settled in northeastern Missouri in 1818 in an area that became Ralls County. North of the confluence of the Missouri and Mississippi rivers, west of Illinois and south of Hannibal, it was part of Little Dixie. Of the people in Ralls County in 1840, one in four was a slave, and Cleaver's grandfather Thomas had been among the slave owners. Ben Cleaver believed that the New Testament – at least Paul and Timothy's epistle to Philemon – neither condemned nor sanctioned slavery. He knew that before the Civil War almost every church in Ralls County had blacks on the rolls "with a certain door for admittance, and seating space." Blacks later were dispatched to their own churches. Years afterward he was deeply embarrassed. "I bow my head in shame at recollection of no 'County Meeting,' during my four or five years as Secretary, when either of our two Negro Congregations was ever mentioned," he wrote in 1965. During retirement in southeast Missouri he was among the few whites in Cape Girardeau to join the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.⁴⁰

Another concern of the era was how to treat the poor, and in this regard members of the Christian Church disagreed. Almost all acknowledged that they should aid the needy, but whether it was better to rely on individual, congregational, or government programs was a point of contention. Most Disciples emphasized individual responsibility. Those who admired wealth or