

## LEAVING MY FIRST JOB—PIONEER GIRLS

It was too big a jump for me at that time to simply decide to leave this work in which I had been engaged—given my life to—for sixteen years. Going back to school was an alternative I could embrace personally, and also “explain” to friends standing by.

But ruminations much later reveal how disenchanted I had become. (See *Unraveling The Slender Thread of Pioneer Girls*.) So I took the step I was ready to take—knowing I could spend one last summer in the part of the work I still embraced—a summer training young women interns in cross-cultural adaptation of the work. I could voice small hints of my dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs—both in the larger Christian culture and in my own life. It would take immersion in a new environment, and—ultimately—in a major internal shift before I could cut the tie officially and resign.

### First Step: Letter of Explanation to Friends in May, 1966

I feel as though I were reaching a kind of turning point in my life, and when that happens, a person wants to share it with her friends.

In just four weeks I will be leaving Chicago for the summer to be at North Star—Pioneer Girls' adult education center in northern Michigan. I'll be working for ten weeks with a dozen young women who are considering a career in girls' work either here in North America with Pioneer Girls, or overseas with one of several girls' work organizations now in existence.

Following that, I plan to take a two-year sabbatical leave from Pioneer Girls to get an M.A. in Sociology at the University of Chicago. This decision has not been a hasty one, but one born of several years of pondering and planning.

I guess I'll always be the kind of person who gets restless and hankers for a change periodically. You may smile indulgently at this, when you recall that I have only had *one job* since my college graduation in 1950. One can be forgiven some restlessness in such a circumstance.

It was this desire for change that took me back to grad school in 1956 and again in 1958, and then to the University of Chicago in January, 1965, during my three-month sabbatical. I had originally intended going on towards a doctorate in my field—Religious Education—until two friends (Zondra and Mary Ann Lindblade) urged me to consider a different field, possibly in secular studies which would be more broadening and introduce me to new patterns of thought, new people, a whole new environment.

It was a big change for me—bigger than I knew at the time, but I am increasingly excited about it. And I need it. All my life has been spent within a comparatively narrow context—Christian home and schools, a more-or-less Christian community, and finally, work in a Christian organization.

In recent years I have been concerned about the lack of contact many of us have with the world about us. I am convinced that God is leading me to become more of a part of this world. Certainly just as salt is essential for savor in food, so too much salt concentrated in one place spoils the taste equally.

The transition will not be easy for me. I have been very secure in Christian circles; my present intellectual attainment has been accepted and praised. I am moving into a field where I am starting at the bottom, where I'm struggling to keep my head above water (i.e., my grades about C-level!). You can imagine what a reversal this is to one who has never put much effort into academic studies. It has been a very humbling experience. I thank God for it, even though it has been extremely difficult at times.

The field I am entering—sociology, with a good dose of anthropology—is new to me, and I have just caught a small glimpse of what it holds for me up to this point. I am excited by the possibilities. In the course of applying for scholarship aid from the government, I am having to plan my research project and state it. With the help of my advisor, I am considering a problem revolving around the roles of women in girls' work, which should have important implications for Pioneer Girls in North America as well as for overseas work.

Will you pray for me as I start the University in October—that I may live and work and study to His glory? Char Smith, my apartment mate, is also taking an educational leave for one year to attend Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, so we'll both be students. She'll be entering the course of study on Pastoral Psychology and Counseling which combines the disciplines of theology and psychology.

My responsibilities at church have changed a bit. I have been Christian Education Board chairman for a year now and I can see little signs of progress that are encouraging. The church has hired a part-time Director of Christian Education. We have made a study of missionary education and are taking action; the Sunday school has grown remarkably due to an able supt., and improved in teaching and organization; our first adult Vacation Bible School with electives was a tremendous success—and as a partial result, the Sunday school will try the elective system in the adult dept. next fall; we've lengthened the children's VBS session to two weeks; and so on. All external signs. I long for the internal changes which mean spiritual vitality.

I am not at all satisfied with the Institutional Church as we know it today, nor with my own personal expression of Christianity as an individual. I am seeking answers. Do you sometimes feel very mediocre and complacent? And affluent? Lethargic? These are the adjectives which seem to describe me much of the time. It is not what I observe in the New Testament. But change comes hard. We need to be praying for one another. Talk is cheap. Inner change is painful.

I suppose there are many other bits of news I might pass on to you in which you would have some interest, but right now I can't think of anything that significant. I haven't conquered any mountain peaks or gotten engaged or published a book or won an Oscar. I've just plodded along. Sometimes I feel caught in a pool of mediocrity and lethargy like that just mentioned above; at other times I can convince myself that this daily plodding is the stuff of which life on this planet is made. I sincerely don't know. I *do* know that I don't experience much of the "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren" of Matthew 25 as I want to; and I have a deep longing to be *approved of God*—to hear His "Well done, good and faithful servant"—not just some day, but now.

Even my resignation letter contained a tiny opening to reapply, for it was written before major internal shifts within me—occasioned by in-depth therapy in the winter of 1967. Only then was I set free. But this second step was critical in making a defined break.

### **Second Step: The Resignation Letter in Fall of 1966**

Louise Troup  
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Dear Louise:

It is hard to type the words, but this is a letter of resignation. Sixteen years, comprising all of one's vocational experience, is a long time, and the ties run deep.

I am resigning because I feel God is leading me to something else. I cannot tell you yet what it is, but this seems to be the next step. One minor factor in the decision is the growing conviction that a Girls Work Overseas Consultant is not Pioneer Girls' greatest need, but again, this is a minor consideration. (i.e., I know there would be other jobs available for me.) If I come to the point later on where I want to re-apply, I will do so, but for now, it seems best to sever the ties.

There are two people to whom I am most grateful when I think of my Pioneer Girls staff experience, and this seems like an appropriate time to mention them: they are Carol Smith and you, Louise. You have been encouraging, Carol stimulating. And my personal affection and esteem for you both goes *very* deep.

This also seems like an appropriate time for a "swan song" statement, if I may be permitted that luxury. I believe Pioneer Girls (I still think of it as "we") is at a crossroads. I think of the war years—the '40's—and the character of the movement then, which you will readily recall. The dynamism, yet the spontaneous informality of it all. Then the '50's, with consolidation, and especially gains in the area of camping. I believe the '60's are calling for something new, and that we are already tardy in responding, simply because an elaborate institution cannot move as quickly or flexibly.

So what is my personal vision for Pioneer Girls?

1. That we not be bound to the *weekday club* idea.
2. That we go where the need is. Statistically, this is and will be the cities. All of life will be urbanized—even in the prairies; in fact it already is to a great extent. We can deplore the changes all we want, but our children must learn to live with them.
3. That we adopt a courageous approach to staff recruitment and dismissal. The problems of our day require that a certain percentage of our staff be equipped with a depth understanding of societal conditions.
4. That a strong link to Brigade be forged with creative leadership at the top. There should be less isolation of women on our staff to exclusively female contacts and the itinerant life, which is abnormal for a young woman. There should be the ability to attract those who choose to work in close connection with men.

5. That we have the willingness to forge ahead with ideas one step ahead of the church, that there be commitment and direct encouragement of this by the board, taking into account the risk involved, but moving ahead in decisions because of their moral rectitude.
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There *is* an element of criticism in this, but I want it to be constructive, and to reflect my honest concern. Some of my other similar (and growing) concerns have been expressed in the last three semi-annual reports—fall 1965, and spring and fall 1966. I sincerely trust that these will fall on the ears of those who can be aroused to respond in some tangible way. I believe that the basic philosophy of Pioneer Girls is uniquely adapted to our contemporary scene, as well as to the unchanging truths of God's Word.

I want to close by expressing special appreciation to Pioneer Girls for specific financial help in my schooling, in cash and in time provided and in making work adjustments top fit my schedule—both in 1958-59 and in the [past two years. Would you please determine the amount of hospitalization I owe Pioneer Girls since October 1, and I will pay this as soon as I am able.

With deep thankfulness,

Most sincerely,

Eunice Russell

### **Aftermath**

It was not until the spring of 1995, that a small group of former staff members gathered to have an in-depth conversation where we tried to reconstruct our sense of where we thought Pioneer Girls had “gone off the tracks” in ways that meant we could no longer associate ourselves with it wholeheartedly. Ironically, by then the director to whom I had given my resignation was one of that group, although she retained to the end of her long life an active concern for its welfare and some contact with it.

The critical change came some years after I left when the organization changed its name to Pioneer Clubs to enable it to serve churches wanting a co-educational program, which required substantive changes in its focus and source of support. The strong emphasis on a cadre of field representatives making strong personal connection with leaders and churches was replaced—including their close tie with the constituency through personal visits and a highly successful summer camping program—with a primary focus on producing written program materials. Churches could be charged for these materials, and the home office put energy into tuning the content to more educationally sophisticated and up-to-date ways of meeting new needs. The new program tended to feature younger clientele for a time, thus losing the distinctive of an all-girls vehicle aimed at the 8 -18 year old girl—with increasing emphasis on the teenage segment that had been the driving force behind one of its founders' vision—Carol Erickson Smith. She herself had been intuitively ahead of the times in her awareness of the place of women in society.

See *Unraveling the Slender Thread of Pioneer Girls* for a more detailed discussion of our thinking at that era. And consult the organization's website ([www.pioneerclubs.org](http://www.pioneerclubs.org)) for a more wholistic view of their mission and operations in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.