His Early Years

Born in Ireland in the year 1839, Jerry never knew his father. Since his mother was unable or unwilling to care for him, he went to live with his grandmother at an early age. One of his earliest recollections is of his grandmother on her knees praying the rosary. He would throw things at her and she would get up and curse and swear at him.

He grew up with no supervision and just roamed around stealing and causing trouble wherever he went. At the age of 13 he was packed up and sent off to New York to live with his sister and brother-in-law. As you can imagine, this arrangement didn’t last very long and he soon moved out and lived with a family on Water street in the slums of lower east side NY. His main “occupation” by this time was that of a river thief.

During the next five to six years, Jerry became one of the most hated ruffians in the neighborhood. He used the proceeds from his thievery to buy clothes and drink. Later he said of himself, “Stealing came natural and easy. A bigger nuisance and loafer never stepped above ground.” His lifestyle was the cause of many stays in the local jailhouse called the tombs. Sometimes he was held only a few days and at other times up to six months.

By his late teens, Jerry McAuley had grown to physical maturity. Looking at him one would have to wonder if he wasn’t born to be bad. He had a retreating forehead and small deep-set eyes. His wide mouth and heavy projecting nose quickly caught one’s attention and could strike fear into the heart of anyone he fixed his gaze upon. His tall, well knit frame with long arms and great hands showed brutal strength. He was such a nuisance that even the rum sellers wanted to get rid of him.
Jerry's Prison Experience

At the age of 19 he was falsely accused of highway robbery, convicted on trumped up charges, and sent to Sing Sing prison for 15 years.

It was January 1857, while burning with vengeance and bitterness, he concluded that the only way he could get someone to listen to his story of innocence and help him was to obey the prison rules and thereby bid his time. Even though he knew he had done enough wrong, and not been caught, to deserve his sentence, he still was not going to accept his loss of freedom without trying to do something about it.

At the end of the 30 mile train ride from New York city to Sing Sing, Jerry saw the sign over the doorway to the prison. It read, "The way of the transgressor is hard." He knew this proverb well and had heard it many times. In his book, TRANSFORMED he says, All thieves and wicked people know it well and they know too that it is out of the Bible. It is a well worn proverb in all the haunts of vice and one confirmed by daily experience. And how strange it is knowing so well that the way is hard, the transgressor will still go on it.

During this train ride was the first time in his life he had reviewed it and felt sorrow to the degree that he was willing to do something he had never done before; obey rules. Born out of hopelessness and indignation, this feeling was never the less the first step to his later conversion.

Designed at the end of the 18th century, Sing Sing was a dark and damp maximum security prison where talking was not permitted and torture was rampant. The coffin like cells were 3'3" wide, 6'7" high and 7" deep. There were no windows in the cells and of course, no indoor plumbing, just a bucket. The foul odor was so rank it was hard to breath at times and the mice, cockroaches, lice, fleas, and bedbugs were everywhere.

Jerry was assigned to the carpet weaving shop and even though it was hard labor, he was a model prisoner for the first two years. He learned to read and write and he was allowed to use the library which had some religious material in it. Once he learned to read, he opted however, to read cheap novels that were illegally sneaked into the prison. Eventually, like most prisoners of that era, he became sick and his health began to fail. As he became restless and sullen, the consequences led to punishment which worsened his health and made him even more bitter and hard hearted.

McAuley's Conversion in Sing Sing

After five years in prison, something happened which was the first of three significant events in his life that would lead to a real change. At a Sunday chapel service he heard a man by the name of Orville Gardner testify of his conversion. He was moved to tears by this testimony and since he had been an associate in many dark and sinful deeds with Gardner, he knew the testimony was real and the man not a hypocrite.

The impact of Gardner's testimony started Jerry's search through the Bible for answers. Night after night he read, which led to a burning desire to have the same change he had seen in Gardner's life. Some still small voice within him said "PRAY". He didn't know how to pray. A struggle for his mind ensued and the inner voice again said, "Don't you remember the prayer of the Publican: God be merciful to me a sinner?" The struggle went on and on. "It was as if God was fighting the devil for me,"
said Jerry, “To every thought that came up there came a verse of scripture.”

For three or four weeks the struggle went on in his mind. He would get on his knees, but just as quickly jump up unable to pray. This happened many times until one day a woman missionary came to the prison and talked and prayed with him. When he saw and heard her literally crying out to the Lord in prayer it moved him beyond words and intensified his struggle. That night he resolved to stay on his knees no matter what happened until he found forgiveness. The following is his description of that night in his book TRANSFORMED:

All at once it seemed as if something supernatural was in my room. I was afraid to open my eyes. I was in an agony and the tears rolled off my face in great drops. How I longed for God’s mercy! Just then, in the very height of my distress, it seemed as if a hand was laid upon my head and these words came to me: “My son, thy sins which are many, are forgiven.” I do not know if I heard a voice, yet the words were distinctly spoken in my soul. I jumped from my knees. I paced up and down my cell. A heavenly light seemed to fill it. A softness and a perfume like the fragrance of flowers. I did not know if I was living or not. I clapped my hands and shouted, “Praise God! Praise God!”

Even though there were to be many more years of drinking, fighting and crime, this is the night Jerry McAuley always pointed to as his conversion to Christ.

At the age of 26 on March 8, 1864, Jerry McAuley was pardoned and set free. He set out to associate with Christians, but their “wavering, unstable, half and half faith staggered me,” he said. The lessons he learned during this time later helped shape his style of operating the first rescue mission in the world.

A Life Reclaimed

Near the end of the 1860’s, a sort of revival broke out in the Water Street district of New York. The time of attempted cleansing became known as the John Allen Excitement. It was during this time that a man by the name of Henry Little befriended Jerry and was instrumental in getting Jerry and his girlfriend, Maria, to a Bible study and prayer meeting at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Franklin Smith.

During the time of prayer, Mrs. Smith fervently interceded on Jerry’s behalf, crying out loudly and weeping great tears. When he saw how much the woman loved his soul in crying out to Jesus on his behalf, it broke the hardness of his heart that had crept back in over the years of willful sin. He began to weep and with the urging of the Franklins and Henry Smith, he cried out, “God, be merciful to me a sinner.” He repeated this over and over adding, “in Jesus name” until he felt a calm joy and cleansing.

This life changing event was described by Franklin Smith many years later:

There was a shock which came into the room, something similar to a flash of lightning which everyone present saw and felt. Jerry fell down on his side prone on the floor with tears streaming from his eyes. “Oh Jesus, you did come back, you did come back,” he cried, “Bless your name.”

Little and the Smiths became frightened and jumped from their knees and ran outside.
Vision for the First Rescue Mission

Soon after this life changing event, God sent a very important person into Jerry McAuley's life. Frederick Hatch was a self-made man who through shrewd business sense and being in the right place at the right time, became very wealthy. His Park Avenue Victorian home was the epitome of respectability. Hatch became McAuley's confidant and with unconditional acceptance was able to encourage Jerry through some rough times in the next couple of years. During the years of 1870 - 1872 Jerry worked at many jobs and lost most because of his bold testimony about Jesus. This was a time of God preparing him for the future.

During much of this preparatory time, Maria was living in New Jersey, and then in New England, to be with her sister. She became saved and began living her life for the Lord. Early in 1872 she returned to New York where she and Jerry were married.

One day while singing and praising God while working in a basement as a porter, Jerry had a vision of what he felt God wanted him to do. In the vision Jerry washed and cleaned people on the outside as they came into his house and the Lord cleansed them from the inside. The tender moment of being in the presence of the Lord brought streams of tears as Jerry vowed to go and serve if the Lord opened the way.

This third significant event was to lead McAuley in raising money for a mission and with the help of Fredrick Hatch, in October 1872 he took possession of the Water Street house. The money he had raised was used to repair the building and soon after, the mission at 316 Water Street named "Helping Hand for Men" was open.

McAuley's Years of Service at the Helping Hand for Men

For the next twelve years of Jerry McAuley's life the Lord mightily used him to be instrumental in the conversion to Christ of countless thousands. The tender love and acceptance he showed to the down and out won over many souls. There have been hundreds of missions started and millions of lives transformed as a direct and indirect result of Jerry McAuley's ministry.

On a fall afternoon in September of 1884, Jerry went home to be with his Lord. His death was the result of tuberculosis he had contracted while in the dark and damp prison at Sing Sing. It seemed as if all of New York came to his open casket funeral to see this unique man who had the vision to open the first rescue mission for the people of the slums.

The rescue missions that are now in almost every major city of the United States and in many foreign cities, are a testament to how God does use even the "least of these" for his glory.