

Richland's Famous Sunday School Contest

The United States Census of 1920 showed Richland, Missouri had a population of 967, yet on July 18th Sunday School attendance at its three churches totaled 3406 men, women and children!

The spiritual life of the community eighty years ago was centered in the town's three (only) churches. The Baptist congregation was housed in a frame building on Washington between Pine and Chestnut and occupied part of the present church property. The Methodist Episcopal Church (Northern Methodist of that date) likewise occupied a frame building at its present location on the north west corner of Pine and Camden. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ-Campbellite) was located where the present Assembly of God is found.

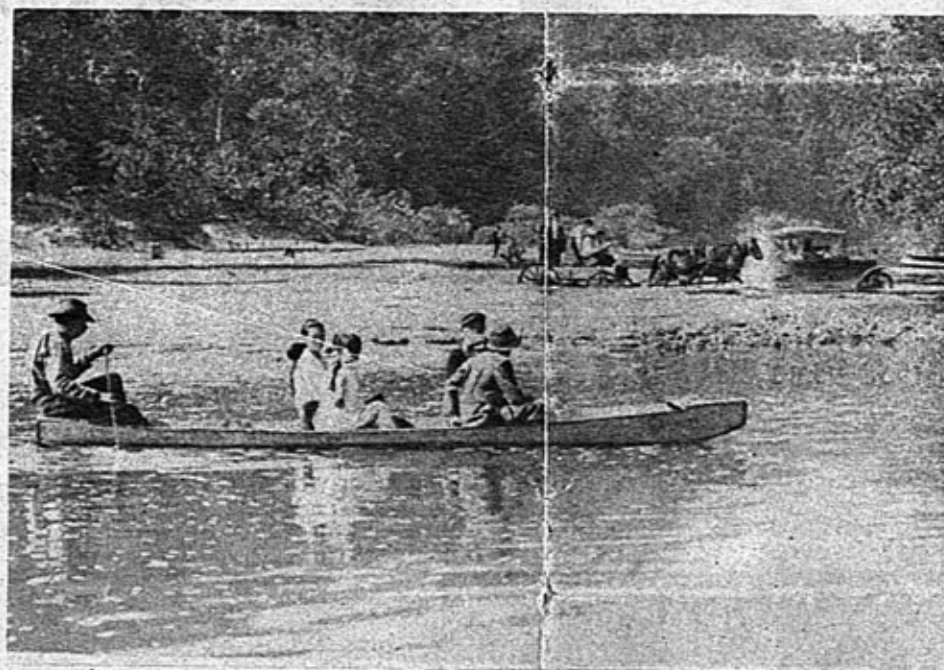
The building in use in 1920 burned several years later and was replaced by the building sold to the Assembly of God when the present church was constructed on Highway 133. There was a certain comradery between the three churches of that day. Then, as now, the City was divided into

three wards. It was the custom that two of the six aldermen would be from each of the three churches.

The same was true of the six member school board with two members from each of the three churches. This at least helped to avoid feelings of partisanship in decisions of the boards. This was a period when teachers were expected to live in the district, to attend church and teach a Sunday School Class. The

teacher who lived out of town and frequently went home on week ends was labeled a "suitcase teacher" and frowned upon by the locals. Sunday School started at 9:45 and church at 11:00. All three church bells, within a block of each other, would ring at 9:15 and again at 9:40. The second bell was for those walking to church to hasten their step and the children playing in the church yard to get to their seats. Parking was no problem because folks in town walked; no one dreamed of driving a car to church. The only cars to be driven were Model T Fords.

In 1920 the Christian Church was housed in the best structure of the



Families came by boat, buckboard wagon, automobile and any means possible to take part in the contest. Courtesy of Gordon Warren.

three churches. The building was brick and had a basement. The front entrance at the east side of the building was at a ninety degree angle from the side walk and above it rose the bell tower. I shall never forget the beautiful three section stained glass

window on the front of the building dedicated to the Yost family. Casper Yost, a son, later became editor of the editorial page of the St. Louis Globe Democrat. Casper's son Robert Yost married my father's sister, Grovena Warren Yost.

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The Methodist church in 1920 was located at the same site as today, but the structure was a white frame building that could well have graced a spot in New England with its characteristic style. Mayor E. A. Steckel was one of the church leaders. Other prominent Methodists were Ed. Lingsweiler, banker, C. H. Davis, attorney, Henry Shubert, local industrialist, Elmer E. Noe, who owned the local telephone company, and Captain H. E. Warren. The four daughters of Dr. James Tyree, Civil War veteran medical officer, namely Amanda Vaughn, Nannie Brock, Minnie Warren and Pauline Parsons were leaders among the ladies in the congregation.

For Sunday School, classes met in the church, on the church grounds and in the Richland City Hall. The church services were held on the church grounds with Bishop William A. Quayle, the Methodist Bishop of Missouri, addressing the congregation.

It was in this setting that H. M. (Murray) McDonald, a seventeen year old member of the Baptist Church, was concerned about what appeared to him to be a lack of interest in Sunday School as evidenced by the poor attendance. He suggested a

contest between the churches to build enthusiasm in the community for Sunday School. Murray was the son of Arch and Martha McDonald who had a family of some five or six children. Arch had been a

Richland businessman but when I knew him was retired and served as Justice of the Peace. Many will remember Murray's sister, Flora McDonald Brice and Brother Harry McDonald, husband of Ruth (Cook) McDonald. Harry was assistant post master for many years. For a number of years Murray was employed by Cities Service Oil Company in Kansas City and later he and his wife operated a motel and restaurant at the Lake of the Ozarks.

In the early stages of the contest there was little interest but as the weeks passed the competitive spirit mounted and in the final stage reached a fever pitch. Richland Mayor E. A. Steckel took the lead in publicizing the Sunday School contest.

To the best of my recollection the numbers from Sunday to Sunday were fairly even with the Methodists slightly ahead on the next to last Sunday. Each church seeking to swell its numbers went far beyond the city limits and though there was no such thing as

17 year old H. M. McDonald suggested the contest as a cure for light Sunday school attendance. Courtesy of Gordon Warren.

a church bus, individuals with automobiles drove out to bring those who had no transportation save the horse and buggy. On the

final Sunday it was the Baptists who scored the winning touchdown. They brought in every rural congregation from



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miles around to swell their numbers. Having more rural congregations to call upon they topped the Methodists and Campbellites.

Regardless of whom became the winner, it was a glorious experience for the community which I doubt was equaled before nor since.

Because their numbers far exceeded the capacity of their church or church grounds, the Baptist Congregation met at the Clover Leaf Fair Grounds (now Shady Dell Park). Not only was the Grand Stand filled but sun shades were draped on either side to accommodate the crowd.

The Rotogravure section of the St. Louis Globe Democrat, devoted to the final day of the contest, pictured James W. Armstrong teaching his Sunday School Class which appeared to fill the sanctuary of the Christian Church. J. W. Armstrong was reported to have spent full time, in the final weeks of the contest, working to swell the numbers for the Christian Church. J. W. was the uncle of his namesake which we knew as James Armstrong. You will recall nephew James retired from his farm near Ozark Fisheries and moved to Richland in his declining years. J. W. Armstrong was the Pulaski County Representative in

the State Legislature for many years. He and my Grandfather, Captain Warren, were very close friends and it was he who delivered the eulogy at my

Grandfather's funeral. It is ironic that his wife, Ida Bryan Armstrong, was an equally avid worker in the Methodist Church. Their home was a large house that occupied the lots where the Farmer and Dodd houses are now, just north of the Baptist Church. On Sunday morning the Armstrongs parted ways at the corner of Washington and Pine, but this did not seem to interfere with their marriage.

We lived next door where the Baptist Church now stands and were neighbors to the Armstrongs.

In looking at the picture of J. W. Armstrong and his Sunday School Class there are two persons whom I am confident I can identify. The partially bald man in the white shirt, no jacket, at the front center of the picture has to be John White. John White and wife retired from the farm and made their home in what I call the Sam Gibson house at the south east corner of Pine and Phelps, just north of the First State Bank. His daughter Hattie Quesenberry and husband lived with them. I believe the man in front of John White with his arm on the chair is Ed Phillips. Ed Phillips was the father of Mrs. Mel Ogle



Richland bank president James Armstrong, shown here in overalls, conducted one of the classes at the Richland Christian Church during the contest. Courtesy of Gordon Warren.

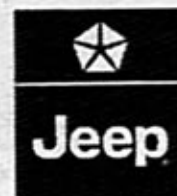
and Grandfather of Edna Mae Young. Other children were Olive Phillips Brown and son Ed Phillips who was just a grade ahead of me in school. Lee Bohannon's face is one I have searched for and imagine I can pick him out in the back of the group but will have to depend on Ed or Lloyd for that identification. I best remember him on the occasions I visited the

church as he presided at the Communion Table. A. P. (Porter) Young, partner in Young and Morgan Hardware was a stalwart Campbellite. Herbert Cowan, uncle of the late Lebanon Mayor, Kenneth Cowan has to be in the group as well as James B. (Jimmy) Lewis.

Others whom I presume are pictured are the Belshes, Robert S.



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