Texas is a huge, diverse state with many cultures, ethnic groups, and lifestyles. Textbook writers, journalists, and even novelists often have a difficult time because of such complexity. Texas novelists, for example, have traditionally had to choose between writing a Southern novel, a Western novel, or a Hispanic Borderlands novel. Our physical and cultural geography is just so complex that it’s difficult to make simple generalizations. The Texas experience defies simple generalizations.

One of our cultural geography traits, on the other hand, is really quite simple. Our Texas religious geography shows a Roman Catholic southern half and a Southern Baptist northern half. We Methodists for the last 100 years have existed as significant minorities among Roman Catholic or Southern Baptist pluralities or majorities.

There is, however, a significant exception right in the center of the state. The strength of the German Methodist churches in Mason and Llano Counties created an exception to the Roman Catholic-Southern Baptist majorities in the rest of the state. Those two counties have regularly reported the highest Methodist percent of population in all of Texas. The region is so distinct that one can argue that this region is the “most Methodist part of Texas.”

Since the German immigrants did not bring Methodism with them from Europe, we know that the Methodist stronghold in the Hill Country was created after their arrival. How did the process of conversion to Methodism occur? What were the key elements of the evangelization? How did some German immigrants become so fervent in their religious expression? All of these are questions that deserve careful consideration.

There is a new book that provides significant insights into these questions. *The Life and Times of a German Methodist Circuit Rider on the Frontier of Texas*, by Robert L. Feuge, PhD, is the story of Conrad Pluenneke who emigrated from Germany and eventually became a Methodist preacher, rancher, and pillar of the German Methodist Hill Country. The story is based on meticulous research, and the author is particularly interested in Methodist practices of the 19th century. His research into land transactions demonstrates how preachers could also become ranchers and thus escape the traditional poverty of 19th century Methodist circuit riders.

Feuge’s work prompted many comparisons with my own family heritage. Conrad Pluenneke was boarding the immigrant ship in Europe as my Hardt ancestors were landing in Galveston. Both of them were soon involved in the war with Mexico, and both eventually embraced Methodism. Our heritage as Texas Methodists is enhanced by the German contribution—Leifeste, Homberg, Lehmburg, Grote, Jordan, Vordenbaumen, Biel, Mueller, Beckendorf, Moelling, Urbanke, Bering—are familiar names. Now, because of Feuge’s work, we know much more about the community of faith they and others created.
News From Bridwell Library

Bridwell Library Collection on the Texas Methodist Centennial Celebration

Eighty years ago, in the fall of 1934, Methodists from across the state gathered in San Antonio to celebrate the centennial of Methodism in Texas. Although Methodist preachers had been active in Texas as early as 1815, the leaders of the centennial celebration equated the 1834 founding of McMahan Chapel in San Augustine, the oldest Protestant church with a continuous history in Texas, with the beginning of organized Methodist work in the region.

The 1934 Texas Methodist Centennial Celebration drew thousands. Persons wishing to study the event today are encouraged to visit Bridwell Library, where evidence of the event can be found in the Methodist Studies Archive. In recent years an archival collection on the Texas Methodist Centennial Celebration has been created. The collection includes four items: the official guest book bearing more than 900 signatures, a copy of the September celebration booklet, a copy of the “Comrades of Conquest” centennial pageant program, and typescript copies of addresses delivered by Mayor C. K. Quin, Bishop A. Frank Smith, Bishop Edwin Holt Hughes, Rev. Umphrey Lee, and Bishop John M. Moore. These resources and the Texas Methodist Centennial Yearbook, a pictorial history published following the celebration, offer insights into an important statewide, pre-unification, pan-Methodist ingathering.

Descendants of pioneer Methodists including Robert Alexander, Littleton Fowler, David Ayres, Orceneth Fisher and Samuel McMahan all signed in. I was particularly interested to see that my grandparents, the Rev. and Mrs. W. W. Hardt and their three children all attended. The next time you’re in Bridwell, ask to see it. It’s worth a look.

Editor’s note—Thanks to Archivist Timothy Binkley for supplying this article and accompanying image. The image is a ledger in which attendees were invited to make notes on their connection to early Texas Methodist history.

Also From Bridwell Library

During our most recent visit to Bridwell, Reference Librarian (and TUMHS member) Jane Lenz Elder graciously provided a copy of

Timothy S. G. Binkley, Archivist
Legacies in which her article on Virginia K. Johnson appeared. Legacies is a joint publication of the Dallas Heritage Society, Dallas Heritage Village, and the Sixth Floor Museum at Dealey Plaza.

The article is “Virginia K. Johnson and the Dallas Rescue Home for ‘Erring’ Women, 1893-1941.” The article describes Johnson’s ministry to prostitutes and their children for almost fifty years. It provides an important insight in the Progressive Era in Dallas. Virginia Hall on the SMU campus is named for her.

Historic Church Pictures

Each issue of the Newsletter asks you to identify one of our historic Texas churches. Here is the image that appeared in the Winter, 2014 Newsletter.

The answer to the Historic Church picture is Arp UMC in southeastern Smith County. Arp was a shipping point for fruits, vegetables, and nursery stock. In 1931 Guy V. Lewis brought in an oil well nearby, and Arp grew as drillers continued to strike oil in the East Texas Oil Field.

The McMurry Oil Refinery soon followed, and by 1936 the population numbered 2500.

The Methodist church in Arp participated in the prosperity of the 1930s and was able to build a new building, shown here.

Arp UMC continues to provide a vital witness and make disciples for Jesus Christ.

Here is the next historic church for you to consider. It will be identified in the next issue of the Newsletter.
Polly’s Chapel Rededication

At 10:00 a.m. on May 10 there will be a rededication of Polly’s Chapel in Bandera County. The Rev. Jose Polycarpo Rodriguez built the Chapel in 1882 and preached in it.

It is a very important part of our Texas Methodist heritage. After the dedication ceremony there will be tours and a barbecue lunch at noon. For more information, and images of the Chapel, visit the site http://www.pollytexaspioneerassociation.org/About_Us.html

Heritage Journal

We are on a different schedule this year because our Annual Meeting will be held in October rather than March. Our thrifty editor, Rob Sledge, saves the Society postage by distributing as many copies of the Heritage Journal as he can at the Annual Meeting. He then mails copies to dues-paying members who did not attend the Annual Meeting.

This year you will not have to wait until the Annual Meeting in October. If you have paid your dues, you should receive this year’s issue in the mail sometime in May. Watch your mailbox.

Annual Meeting

The Annual Meeting of the TUMHS will not be held in March as customary. It will be October 8-11 in conjunction with the Jurisdictional Convocation of Archivists in San Antonio.

Please do not be confused. Although the official title of the gathering is “Convocation of Archivists,” it is also for anyone interested in the history of Methodism in Texas and the Southwest.

The local organizers of the Convocation have put together an outstanding program. Program, housing, and registration details are all accessible through the Southwest Texas Conference (Soon to be Rio Texas Conference) homepage http://www.umcswtx.org/scj-convocation-archivists

It’s not too early to go online and register.

Directory

President
Dr. Garry L. Nall
7206 Versailles Drive
Amarillo, Tx 79121
806-355-1450
gnall@att.net

Vice President
Rev. Dr. Dan Flores
1620 Speronelli Road, NW, Albuquerque, NM 87107
dflores@gmail.com

Secretary
Rev. Barbara Hugghins
901B Palestine St.
Jacksonville, Tx 75766
903-586-2494
bh@jacksonvilletmethodist.org

Treasurer
Mr. Stewart Caffey
5426 89th St.
Lubbock, Tx 79424
stewacs@aol.com

Warnick Awards Chair
Rev. Dr. William J. Bryan III
P. O. Box 750133
Dallas, Tx 75172
214-768-4900
wbryan@smu.edu

Heritage Journal Editor
Rev. Dr. Robert W. Sledge
3141 Chimney Circle
Abilene, Tx 79606
rsledge@mcm.edu

Newsletter Editor
Wm. C. Hardt
10375 New Wehdem Rd.
Brenham, Tx
979-830-5210
whardt@gmail.com
Membership/Registration Information

The good works of the TUMHS including the Warnick Award, the Walter Vernon Student Essay Award, the Annual Meeting, the publication of the Heritage Journal, and lifting up the UM heritage depend upon the dues and gifts of its members. Your dues and gifts are used exclusively for these programs. We pay no rent, utilities, or insurance. Board members are not reimbursed for travel expenses. The membership benefits are a real bargain. The Heritage Journal alone is worth the $20 annual dues. Please send your dues and gifts to the address below.

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Stewart Caffey
5426 89th Street
Lubbock, Texas 79424