

Stillwater First Presbyterian Church History

**by Clarence S. Bassler
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The Presbyterian Church of Stillwater, Oklahoma

In the month of May 1889, a committee of nine men were chosen from the Winfield Townsite Company of Winfield, Kansas to go into the Indian Territory to select a place for a townsite which would later become a county seat. This place was to be on Stillwater Creek as near as possible to the mouth of the creek. The committee made its first stop at a place three and one half miles west of the present Court House. There were sooners on the land, so the committee went east and settled on a tract where the late Robert A. Lowry had a claim. The following men gave land for the townsite; - Robert A. Lowry 80 acres, David Husband 40 acres, Sanford Duncan 40 acres, and a man by the name of Burks, 80 acres.

One June 11th, 1889, there was a drawing for town lots and each person that secured a lot paid a small sum of money to keep the organization going and \$1.25 to the government. There were allowed to draw one 25 x 140 foot lot for business and two lots for residence. There were certain blocks reserved for schools and parks. These were the Court House, Alcott, Lincoln, and Jefferson schools. The block where the South High School now stands was reserved for a park J.W. Thatcher Sr said a number of years before his death that he planted those trees and cultivated them like they were corn.

Each church represented in Stillwater at the time of the drawing of lots was given a building site. The Presbyterian, Methodist, Catholic, and Congregational churches each received lots. The Act of May 14th, 1890, provided that lots occupied by any religious organization, incorporated or otherwise, conforming to the approved survey within the limits of the townsite should be conveyed to or hold trust for the same. The Presbyterian church received lots 11 & 12 in Block "A" on 6th Avenue, between Duck and Duncan streets where it now stands.

The Presbyterian Board of Home Missions U.S.A. sent Reverend Simon P. Myers as "Missionary to Stillwater, Oklahoma." as of April 1st, 1890. He preached his first sermon in Stillwater on April 13, 1890, at 7:30 p.m. The Presbyterians held their services in the upstairs room of a two story frame building belonging to A. W. Swope on the corner now occupied by Skeens church organizations which caused quite a bit of confusion at times since it was on Main Street and only two doors from a saloon.

On November 2, 1890, the Rev. S. P. Myers said it was time to build a church edifice. He had been here since the first of April that year and as, yet no church had erected a building and that very evening, the services were disrupted time and again by the shouting and horseplay at the saloon while Reverend Myers prepared to administer communion. The music for the evening was furnished by Miss Jennie Munhall who played the ancient organ, Frank J. Wykoff, bass, W. A. Swiler (member of town council and not of the church), tenor, Mrs. VanMeter, alto and Mrs. Ollie Stephenson, soprano.

Before the meeting was finished the Presbyterian Church of Stillwater was organized and had thirteen charter members. The charter members were Mr. and Mrs. Harry Bullen, of Winfield, Kansas, Mr. and Mrs. Peter Millhouse of Winfield, Kansas, Mrs. Mary C. Huych of Council Grove, Kansas, Mrs. Mary E. Gillett, Gloversville, New York, Mrs. Augusta McGraw, Cedron, Ohio, Mrs. Ursula Myers, Kingman, Kansas, Miss Fanny Myers and Earl S. Myers of Kingman, Kansas, Mrs. Sarah L. Starr, Arkansas City, Kansas, Mrs. Mary J. Ross, Concordia, Kansas. The thirteenth member was Missionary S. P. Myers. The first Elders elected were Peter F. Millhouse and Frank A. Hutto on November 3, 1890, and Harry Bahntge on April 17, 1892. Harry B. Bullen, (father of Clarence K. Bullen), Hays Hamilton (father of Mrs. Frank B. Cross) and Thomas S. Covert were appointed as trustees on September 7, 1890.

At the time of drawing for lots on June 11, 1889, it was thought that the present Sixth Avenue would be Main Street and that the Court House, the Presbyterian and Congregational churches would be on Main Street and in the center of town. It is told that a bunch of gamblers from Guthrie who had lost heavily there settled on the lots in this part of town, so the "builders" moved further east and made Main Street run north and south, placing the center of town at the present corner of Ninth and Main Street. This left the church lots so far out in the barren prairie that the officers of the church decided to sell and buy closer to town. The lots were sold to the two daughters of J. C. Neal, an early Experiment Station worker and bought for the sum of \$70. The church then bought lots 5 and 6 in Block 23 on Lewis Street just north of the water tower where the Ward Chevrolet shop is located.

During the summer and fall of 1890, the women of the group had organized a Ladies Aide Society and had started a Sunday School. The ladies had rummage sales, and ice cream socials to raise money. The ice cream socials generally brought in \$20. The ice had to be hauled from Guthrie by team and wagon when the roads were passable.

There was no money in those days to build churches, but it was known that they could not continue to hold services with so much interference, so it was decided to build. Mr. W. A. Swiler, although future welfare of the church and being a member of the Town Council, felt that he had some influence and suggested that the minister go with him, so they might be able to raise some funds. Reverend Myers agreed – Swiler told him they would go the saloons first, but Reverend Myers who had been a church man for more than thirty years refused – but not for long – and on the rounds they found that the saloon keepers were the heaviest contributors.

The Reverend Myers preached unemotionally and in good Presbyterian manner and before the year was ended, the congregation had a building in which to worship. This was the second church building to be erected in Stillwater, as the Methodists had the first building at the corner of Eighth Avenue and Duncan Street.

Harry B. Bullen, a charter member of the church, who operated a lumber yard, sold the lumber to the church at cost. Carpenters donated their labor and Bullen and others worked on the building after business hours. Farmers hauled the lumber from Mulhall, which was the nearest railroad. There was a sawmill on the creek and much native lumber was sawed and used in the construction of the first buildings in Stillwater. When the old "Annex" was razed in 1951 to make room for the new Educational Unit, it was found that the framework, joists, studding, and rafters were native oak.

On August 24th, 1891, Reverend Myers preached the first sermon in the new building, which was still unfinished. The dedicatory sermon was preached by Reverend R. V. Hill, on January 24, 1892. It was not until 1904 that the church became independent of mission support.

The Stillwater Gazette of January 22, 1892, said that "There were three community church buildings in the city and at least six different denominations ministering to the spiritual wants of the inhabitants". Some of the first sessions of the Oklahoma A&M College which opened in September 1891, were held in the Presbyterian Church, just about a month after it was completed. Mt. W. A. Swiler said the town council bought benches and movable partitions so classes could be held in the large room.

The first Commencement exercises of the college were held Sunday morning, June 12, 1892 in the "audience room of the Presbyterian Church". (Chapman, Founding of Stillwater). When the college was founded in Stillwater, there were no buildings on the campus so the 45 students that were enrolled were taken care of in the Presbyterian and Congregational churches.

The "Oklahoma Hawk" published in Stillwater on March 1, 1893, said that there were eight organizations maintaining ministers and holding regular services. The Methodists had the best building at 8th and Duncan, costing about \$2,500. The Congregationalists had a good building at 6th and Duncan and the Presbyterians had a good building, each of the latter costing about \$1,500.

While Reverend S. P. Myers was serving as pastor of the Presbyterian church, he was also busy with civic affairs. On March 5, 1891, W. A. Swiler resigned as the president of the school board and Reverend Myers was appointed to take his place. While ministering to the Stillwater church, he was interested in getting a church started at Yates, which was on the north side of Lake Carl Blackwell, a short distance from the Community Building. Several of the members of that congregation, now extinct, belong to the church at Stillwater.

In April 1907, the congregation decided that since the old building was too small to meet the needs of the fast growing city, college, and congregation, it would be well to secure a location out toward the college and move the church building. This was done, they bought back the lots that had been give to them at the time of the drawing and then moved the building to this place where it faced the east on Duncan Street. There were two large rooms built along the north side to accommodate the college students.

There were 104 freshmen at the college during the winter of 1906-1907 and the Presbyterians received quite a number of these. These were two college classes which were taught by Zeb Holler and A. H. "Bat" Nelson, one taking the boys and the other to fill the tank on Sunday morning and it would invariably run over and if the wind was in the south, one could not get into the church for Sunday School or church service without getting wet.

When it was decided to move the building, the trustees contracted with Theo Gudgel, a local house mover, to do the job. There was no paving in the city, so the contractor could drive stakes in the street to hitch to in the moving. The largest threshing engine in the country was anchored about a block ahead and then by a system of blocks and tackle, the building was pulled by one large team of horses. It was taken north to 6th, and then west to the present location of the church.

In the early part of 1922, the congregation decided they must have more room and that they should build a new church. They purchased the residence just north and had it moved off. It went to 213 West 5th where it is still used as a residence. Mrs. Samuel Smith lived in the house before it was moved, having been there more than 16 years. (Mrs. Smith later became Mrs. H. C. Woodyard.

On March 7, 1923, a contract was let for the construction of the present sanctuary and was signed by G. E. Moore, chairman and W. L. Lahman, secretary of the Board of Trustees. At this time the sold structure was turned so it faced the south and next to the alley and was known as the "Annex" and was greatly revered by the older members of the congregation. The Annex was torn down in 1951 to make room for the new Educational Building.

The present sanctuary was dedicated on September 14, 1924, the sermon was preached by Reverend Allen S. Davis. The first services were held in the sanctuary before the walls were plastered or the floor finished. Chairs and benches were used by those who did not care to stand.

The first person to die in Stillwater was a lady by the name of Pierce, who lived with her brother, on a lot just west of the Midwest Creamery. She was buried on the lots where the Presbyterian church stands, but was later moved to the present cemetery after it was established.

The first homicide in Payne County occurred while Frank J. Wikoff was the county attorney. He prepared the case but before it came to trial, Frank A. Hutton was elected county attorney. Wykoff was asked to prosecute the case. The trial was held in the Presbyterian church under the water tower and the man was convicted and sentenced to five years in prison but was later paroled.

Mrs. Frank B. Cross (Fearn Hamilton) was the first baby to be baptized in the new church when it stood by the water tower.

The United Brethren church drew lots 9 and 10 in Block 34 on west 9th Avenue (where Hoke Lumber Company is located) at the time of the drawing for lots when Stillwater was established. They later purchased their present building site from the Congregational Church.

The following ministers have served the Presbyterian Church:

- Simon P. Myers, April 1, 1890 - 1893
- R. Cameron Townsend, 1894-1895
- Evan M. Landes, 1897 - 1898
- Charles W. Foreman, 1899 - 1901
- William Sickels, 1902 - 1905
- Wesley C. Brewer, 1906 to 1911 (Resigned because of ill health)
- LeRoy C. Ilsley, 1912 - August 3, 1916
- Theodore H. Aszman, January 7, 1917 - July 2, 1918
- George A. Hartman, December 27, 1917 - July 2, 1918
- L. J. Coats (temporary) August 25, 1918 - April 13, 1919
- Allen S. Davis, July 14, 1919 - October 27, 1940
- Clayton S. Valder, January 1941 - February 1, 1951
- William J. Hage, June 1951 - February 8, 1957
- James Garner, August 1957 - October 1, 1960
- James R. Struthers, June 1, 1961 - present

Reverend Allen S. Davis preached his last sermon in Stillwater on October 27, 1940 after forty years in the ministry, with twenty one of them at Stillwater. After Dr. Davis retired, he gave his entire library to the Public Library in this city. He was buried in Fairlawn Cemetery, June 12, 1942.

Harry B. Bullen, a charter member of the church, died August 9th, 1929, at LaJunta, Colorado, while on his way to a fishing camp. He was buried on August 13, in Fairlawn Cemetery.

On June 6, 1951, Mrs. H. B. Bullen, the only surviving charter member of the church wielded the spade in the groundbreaking ceremony for the new \$200,000 Educational Building of the church. Mr. George S. Baker was chairman of the Building Committee.

Dr. A. C. Scott, who was president of the college from July 1, 1899 to June 30, 1908, was a member of the church, played the organ for church services and also assisted with the singing.

The large elm tree at the southeast corner of the sanctuary was planted by Raymond Moore, Stuart Smith and Besse Baker, on a special occasion when a number of trees were planted around the church after it was moved from near the water tower.

The following list of early members was picked from the records by Lottie B. Wood, who was church secretary from many years, but who is now living at Norman, Oklahoma in the Presbyterian Home.

- Miss Alice Hastings, October 7, 1900
- W. L. Lahman, November 20, 1900
- Miss Grace Fernandes, 1902
- Clarence S. Bassler, January 6, 1907
- Emma S. (Bassler) Elledge, January 6, 1907
- Miss Annie Hastings, April 7, 1907
- Mrs. Florence Dunn, April 3, 1910
- Mrs. Forn (Hamilton) Cross, March 31, 1914
- Miss Emma A. Chandler, January 15, 1913
- C. Ray Smith, April 6, 1913
- W. B. Murphy, December 15, 1915
- C. E. Donart, July 1, 1917

Lois Hastings, November 25, 1917

Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Oyster were members of the church at Yates, Mrs. Oyster being baptized there as were her four children. Reverend Allen S. Davis baptized Lester Oyster.

Mr. S. E. Andrews, who was secretary to the president of the college had been financial secretary-treasurer of the church for a number of years and on or about September 12, 1914, he left Stillwater to live at Cotton Plant, Arkansas. When he went to the train that morning to go to Guthrie, he told me he had made arrangements for me to act as the financial secretary, but he failed to tell me how much money there was in the bank. On September 14th, I went to the Stillwater National Bank and told Mr. E. E. Good about the deal and he wrote me a check for \$15.89 signed Andrews name to it with his initials and gave it to me to start business. I carried on until March 31, 1927, at which time L. L. Lahman became treasurer and Mrs. Emma Elledge became financial secretary.

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