

PREVIEW

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EL PASO'S FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
AND ITS BUILDERS

THESIS

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PREVIEW

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Dedicated to the Belle Thumm Class
and its teacher, Mrs. Aubrey Hesler.

PREVIEW

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CHAPTER I

THE FIRST FIFTEEN YEARS, 1885-1900

The First Christian Church of El Paso, which today occupies the entire 900 block on Arizona Street, is one of the city's most beautiful. The building is bounded on the west by St. Vrain Street, on the east by Ange Street; and on the north is a spacious parking area, paralleling Nevada Street. The structure, which was designed by Carroll and Daeuble and Associates of El Paso, and built by R. E. McKee, Inc.¹ at an approximate cost, with furnishings, of \$350,000, is of modified Spanish mission design and is built in a U-shape of mellow buff brick which is trimmed in cast stone and terra cotta.

The sanctuary is at the southeast corner of the building; and the fellowship hall is on the west side, with an entrance on St. Vrain Street. In between the sanctuary and the hall is a three-story tower. The sanctuary, with a seating capacity of 600, has a high, arched ceiling and beamed rafters which produce a cathedral effect. Pews and chancel furniture are of white oak, while the carpet is of a church wine, and the baptistry draperies are of a deep maroon. The choir seats are on both sides of the altar, while the organ

¹El Paso Herald-Post, October 25, 1950.

is at the left, as one faces the chancel. A junior chapel, located in the north corner of the education building, is almost a miniature of the main sanctuary, so far as the furnishings are concerned.

The building was formally dedicated in May, 1952,² and is now free of debt as the last mortgage paper was burned during a ceremony in December, 1958. A \$35,000 pipe organ was purchased by the congregation and was installed in October, 1959. The pastor of the First Christian Church is Dr. James Jauncey, while Mr. Keith Pierce is associate minister, and serves as choir director and youth sponsor.

The history of a church is inextricably linked with the history of a community, of which the church is a part. Communities and churches march forward hand in hand and experience growth together. So it has been with the First Christian Church. A contemporary description of that frontier outpost in West Texas called El Paso as it appeared in the early 1880's indicates that there were only two hundred residents, no railroads, no modern improvements--in fact, nothing but a few old adobe structures and a mule-drawn street car.³ But the first church building was completed in 1882,

²The El Paso Times, May 4, 1952.

³Owen White, Out of the Desert (El Paso, Texas: The McMath Publishers, 1923), 161.

followed by a tax-supported two-room adobe school established the next year, and the town by 1885 could boast of a population of 5,500 and five railroads.⁴

The first Protestant church established in El Paso was the Episcopal, which was a result of the efforts of Father Joseph Wilkens Tays. It was founded in 1870, but no church building was completed before 1882, and until 1907 it was located on Mesa Avenue between Texas and Mills Streets. From 1885 to 1930, the First Baptist Church was at Magoffin and East San Antonio Streets, where the present Toltec Building is now located. On the corner of Stanton and Texas, now the site of the El Paso National Bank, was erected the Trinity Methodist structure, while the Presbyterian edifice was located on Myrtle and Kansas from 1882 to 1906. St. Mary's Chapel, the first Catholic church in the city, was erected at North Oregon and Wyoming Streets in 1882.⁵

Typical of the southwestern town in the 1800's, El Paso was infested with saloons, where hard liquor, gambling, and dance-hall girls only increased problems of law and order for the public officials, and there were few enticements for saintly folk to choose the small desert town as a community

⁴El Paso Herald-Post, April 28, 1956.

⁵Ibid.

in which to settle and rear their families.⁶ But into that setting in 1883 came a blacksmith by trade, with his wife and five children; three other children were to be born later in El Paso. That energetic and preaching smithy was Philip Miner, who came to the Southwest, as did so many others, for his health.⁷

Blacksmith Miner was born in Pennsylvania on March 5, 1825, but as a youth became a resident of Indiana where he married Elizabeth J. Lichtyler, a native of Tennessee. The couple moved to Dallas, Texas in 1849, where they found a settlement of three log cabins. The adventurous spirit of the great pioneering countryman led him, with his family, for the next thirty years to residences in Denton, Georgetown, and Austin. He was appointed Justice of the Peace in Williams County, Texas, August 12, 1865.⁸ In addition to

⁶Dr. Howard Thompson, "Makers of El Paso" (unpublished thesis in the El Paso Public Library, no university, n.d.), 69.

⁷Mrs. H. E. Stevenson, "Scrapbook" (unpublished), in possession of Mrs. H. L. Stevens, 1613 N. Stevens Street, El Paso, Texas. Mrs. H. E. Stevenson was the former Florence Villas whose father was Dr. Walter M. Villas, an early pioneer of El Paso. Upon her marriage to Dr. H. E. Stevenson, a son of another early pioneer family, she became a member of the Myrtle Avenue Church, and until her death in January of 1959, she was a most faithful Disciple.

⁸Miss Irvin N. Cross, Letter of November 25, 1959 (unpublished), in possession of Mrs. H. L. Stevens, 1613 N. Stevens Street, El Paso, Texas. Miss Cross is the granddaughter of Philip Miner, the founder.

serving the community in which he lived in the important capacity of blacksmith, he also taught the inhabitants about Christ and a Christian way of life. Being a student himself, not only of the Bible, but of the subjects of science and medicine too, he felt the tremendous urge for education. Therefore, he was most active in the movement to establish public schools, as well as churches, throughout Texas.⁹

Consequently, when Philip Miner settled in El Paso in 1883, his course followed the pattern of the past. He toiled at the forge early and late earning a livelihood for his family, while other hours found him preaching and teaching the gospel to a few Disciples who gathered around him. In the beginning there were six or eight who regularly met with him to worship, and that became the unit around which grew the splendid congregation of the present First Christian Church. In 1885 the little group, with thirteen consecrated Christians, became an organized congregation in spite of the fact that they had no place in which to meet. However, undaunted as they were, they arranged to meet first in a small adobe building at First and Stanton Streets; then for a period of time they conducted services in the District Court room; while later they worshipped in a building on

⁹Ibid.

Campbell Street that also furnished quarters for the post office. Still later, they met for services in a paint shop on Stanton Street.¹⁰ The thirteen charter members were Millard Patterson, James A. Ashford, Zeno B. Clardy, William Coldwell, H. F. Sanders, Claude Miner, Emma Miner, Susie Brack, Mrs. Robert F. Campbell, Mrs. A. J. Stevens, Miss Lida Moyer, Mrs. E. C. Pew, and Rev. Philip Miner.¹¹

Millard Patterson was a native of Missouri and served as El Paso County Attorney when Ysleta was the county seat. Many times he joked about living in Ysleta to hold his job.¹² He was outstanding in his profession, admired for his keen judgment and determination. Moreover, he was a staunch supporter of the church and was never inconsiderate toward other denominations. The Apostle Paul was his ideal.¹³ Mr. Patterson was magnanimous in his religious and charitable contributions, whether they consisted of his money, his time, or his talents. He was an elder in the church for many years, acted as Sunday School Superintendent, served on numerous committees during his life, while he spent much of

¹⁰Mrs. Stevenson, "Scrapbook."

¹¹Ibid.

¹²El Paso Herald-Post, December 17, 1934.

¹³Mrs. I. A. Shedd, "Memoirs" (unpublished), in possession of Mrs. H. L. Stevens, 1613 N. Stevens Street, El Paso, Texas.

his time in conducting prayer meetings that were exceptionally well attended. Those services "did much to encourage, strengthen, and educate the members."¹⁴ Mr. Patterson built Lydia Patterson Institute as a memorial to his first wife, who was a devoted Methodist.¹⁵ He drew up the charter for Brite College of the Bible in 1914, a document which Brother Brite often called "water tight" because it was drawn up by "one of the best lawyers in Texas."¹⁶ He was a member of Brite College Board of Trustees from 1914 to 1921.¹⁷

In 1921 he retired and moved to California and died quite suddenly on December 16, 1934. Mr. Patterson owned many pieces of downtown property from which numerous organizations were substantially benefited in his will.¹⁸ Austin Park Christian Church received trust awards of property, and First Christian was awarded real estate on Missouri Street which was to be sold or used as a building site for a new edifice at the discretion of church officials. Brite College

¹⁴El Paso Herald Post, December 17, 1934.

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Colby D. Hall, History of Texas Christian University (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian University Press, 1947). Printed by Stafford-Lowden Press, 226.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸El Paso Herald-Post, December 17, 1934.

of the Bible at Fort Worth received a legacy of \$60,000,¹⁹ while Julia Fowler Home at Dallas, local branches of the Salvation Army, and the Y.M.C.A. were amply remembered.²⁰ Mr. Patterson advised that beneficiaries in his estate must not aid anti-Christ moves; they were "not to donate to, or encourage in anyway, the establishment of any pretended philosophical or religious cult that denies the personality of Jesus Christ."²¹

James A. Ashford was the manager of Bacon's Furniture Store at 406 El Paso Street and resided at that address. Zeno B. Clardy was a law partner of the firm of Blacker and Clardy and resided at 700 Mesa Avenue. William Coldwell, attorney at law, later became a city judge and resided at the corner of South Campbell and Overland Streets. H. F. Sanders was a stone mason whose home was on Second Street between Topnella and Park. Claude Miner, son of Reverend Philip Miner, was a wheelwright in his father's shop and resided at the same address, which was 804 North Oregon. Emma Miner, a daughter of Reverend Miner, in 1887 had married R. E. Cross, who had come to El Paso in 1885 from North Carolina. Their

¹⁹Hall, History of Texas Christian University, 226.

²⁰El Paso Herald-Post, December 17, 1934.

²¹Ibid.

residence was also 804 North Oregon. Mrs. Susie Brack, wife of William B. Brack, who was a partner of the Brack and Neil law firm, resided on the corner of North Oregon and Rio Grande Streets. Mrs. A. J. Stevens' husband was a wheelwright and their home was on Franklin Street between Florence and Ochoa Streets.²² Mrs. E. C. Pew was the wife of Edward C. Pew, who was proprietor of a flourishing shoe store on San Antonio at Oregon and "Pew's Shoes" remained an El Paso watchword long after the turn of the century.²³

Mrs. Robert F. Campbell, although a most eminent social leader of El Paso for many years, was unflagging and steadfast in her support of the church, whereas her palatial house at 701 Mesa Avenue²⁴ was always open for the needs of the church.²⁵ For many years the Ladies' Aid Society

²²El Paso Directory of 1889 (El Paso, Texas: The El Paso Directory Company, 1889).

²³Historical and Descriptive Review (El Paso, Texas: Trade and Commerce Publishing Company, n.d.), 77.

²⁴Mrs. Campbell's husband served as Mayor from 1894-1896 and was a prominent Republican leader. The Campbell home, located on the corner of Mesa Avenue and Wyoming, was built in 1881. Inasmuch as the railroads had not been completed between California and El Paso, and the house being constructed of redwood, the lumber was hauled by wagons. The structure consisted of two stories and for many years was considered the finest and the most beautiful residence between San Antonio and Los Angeles. El Paso Daily Herald, February 25, 1889 and January 17, 1919.

²⁵Mrs. Shedd, "Memoirs."

gathered there to sew, to tack comforts, and to carry on other activities for money-making purposes. Inasmuch as Gee, who was Mrs. Campbell's Chinese servant, knew every member of the church, he would look in on the group of ladies with a smile, as they labored at their tasks, to inquire, "How many today?" Immediately he would disappear to return later with dainty refreshments. Perhaps, Gee, in his bland way, would say, "She no home," to society friends, but he never said "no" to any member of the church who called there. Mrs. Campbell rushed in her stylish cart with its high-stepping gray horse all over town on errands of mercy. She became the first president of the C.W.B.M. and was considered to have been one of the most capable workers as well as one of the most liberal contributors during the early years of the church.²⁶ She died in July, 1915.²⁷

Emma Miner Cross, whose mother died in El Paso in 1888, was a consecrated servant as was her father, and she was considered one of the best Bible students the church had known. While she always prepared the unfermented wine, she also took the responsibility for the communion service and linen. It was she who compiled the short church history which

²⁶Ibid.

²⁷El Paso Daily Herald, July 19, 1915.

was placed in the cornerstone of the Oregon Street Church on March 14, 1904,²⁸ later to be removed to the cornerstone of the present building on March 11, 1951.²⁹ Also at Mrs. Cross's home, in 1838, was organized the first Ladies' Aid Society. The women soon earned one hundred dollars, and with it they purchased county script, which was held until the construction of the Myrtle Avenue Church.³⁰

From the beginning the small congregation followed in the leadership of Reverend Miner, who refused at all times to accept any recompense for his preaching. In spite of the difficulties with which they inevitably met, they held regular services and experienced slow but sure progress. The general tendencies toward lawlessness belittled any of the Christian efforts. Dean Hall of T.C.U. added a note of humor as he discussed the Disciple's movement into the Texas frontiers during the 1880's, when he related the story of the fearful old man who prayed, as he set out for the West-- "Goodbye, God, I'm going to Texas."³¹ And as the local papers printed headlines of the activities of lawless citizens, El Paso was an example for the Southwest and Texas. It was

²⁸Mrs. Stevenson, "Scrapbook."

²⁹First Christian News, March 9, 1951.

³⁰Mrs. Stevenson, "Scrapbook."

³¹Hall, Texas Disciples, 31.

at that time that the Herald editor decided to give front page importance to the churches by printing sermon briefs from time to time.³²

In order to stimulate interest, the Christian congregation held frequent protracted meetings which were conducted by some of the most able revival leaders in the country. In 1889 Brothers A. J. Bush and J. H. Rosecrans, two of the most successful in the brotherhood, held a three-weeks meeting which gained several new members for the Christian congregation.³³ A. J. Bush was a dignified gentleman who wore a Robert E. Lee style beard and was possessor of a pleasant voice and a friendly manner that drew people to him. He was free of that pugnacious and raspy attitude that was frequently a characteristic of the preachers of the day.

His irenic personality, no doubt, won favor for the new Missionary Society and at the same time enabled him to hold his own with those who opposed his religious principles and church reforms.³⁴

Mrs. H. L. Stevens, as a girl, was very fond of "Uncle Andrew" when he visited relatives in her home town of Gainesville, Texas, where she grew up as a friend of Reverend Bush's

³²El Paso Daily Herald, January 7, 1889.

³³George Wauchope, "Memoirs" (unpublished), in possession of Mrs. H. L. Stevens, 1613 N. Stevens Street, El Paso, Texas.

³⁴Hall, Texas Disciples, 161.

nieces. He was extremely popular with the young people.³⁵ Most of his life was given to holding revivals and organizing churches, especially in the churches that were financially unable to obtain evangelists and organizers.³⁶ J. H. Rosecrans likewise gave many splendid years of service to evangelism in Texas, later becoming, for ten years, a popular faculty member of Carlton College at Bonham. The two men, educated and well-trained, were so successful in the El Paso meeting that the church was reorganized with a membership of forty-five.³⁷

The following spring in 1890, a minister, Francis Brunner, came to El Paso because of his health. Soon he was prevailed upon to preach for the Christian Church and became the first salaried pastor at fifty dollars per month.³⁸ During his pastorate Mr. Brunner lived at a ranch on the mesa out beyond old Fort Bliss toward the mountains, while the church services were held in the 400 block on Mesa Avenue. No other accounts are available except that he left

³⁵Mrs. H. L. Stevens, El Paso, Texas, Interview, February 15, 1959.

³⁶Hall, Texas Disciples, 201.

³⁷Mrs. Stevenson, "Scrapbook."

³⁸Ibid.

El Paso in 1891.³⁹ Neither is there much history recorded of the activities of the congregation from 1891 to 1893, except for an occasional news item in the local papers which does verify the church's existence. One example in 1892 was in regard to the Christmas programs of the different city congregations and that of the Christian Church was included.⁴⁰ In 1893 the papers carried news that the Protestant church services were being disturbed. The Evening Tribune noted that church attendants complained they were disturbed in Sunday morning services by the Juarez brass band, which paraded the streets in front of the churches while the ministers were preaching.⁴¹

George Wauchope, who has been a member for the greatest number of years, met with the Christian brethren for the first time December 31, 1893 and is still attending services at First Christian. Having met and known each minister who has served the congregation, Mr. Wauchope knows the history of the church as none other does. At the time he came into the church the members were meeting in the paint shop.⁴²

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰El Paso Daily Herald, December 26, 1892.

⁴¹Evening Tribune, October 5, 1893.

⁴²Wauchope, "Memoirs."

In the spring of 1895 another protracted meeting was held by one of the most prominent of Christian evangelists, B. B. Sanders.⁴³ He was a progressive in the church and later served as one of the first state secretaries of the Missionary Societies (1899-1904).⁴⁴ As a young man, while serving his four years in the Confederate army, Mr. Sanders had marched through Southwest Texas into New Mexico, and had been a witness to the vast movement of the western frontier. He met folks in a jubilant and friendly fashion, and his ready sense of witty humor often turned to serious account as he preached. While his sermons were filled with illustrations from the war experiences that fitted into his thought patterns naturally, his sentiments never displayed any southern prejudice, so he was able to use the pictures as a point of contact with the old soldiers.⁴⁵ Mr. Hall asserts that "despite the cheerful and social disposition, in a sense, he was a man apart. There was an atmosphere of

⁴³El Paso Daily Herald, January 8, 1895.

⁴⁴Hall, Texas Disciples, 162.

⁴⁵Ibid., 168.

strength that came out of deep tragedy."⁴⁶

The paint shop was too small to accommodate the attendance for the revival that was conducted by Reverend Sanders, so the Methodists permitted the Disciples to use their sanctuary during the week nights and, as the Baptist Church was the only one that afforded a baptistry, several new converts were baptized there at the close of the meeting.⁴⁷

The summer of 1895 brought the well-known J. C. Mason to the church,⁴⁸ and, as he tells of the El Paso experiences in his daughter's "Jacob Caswell McCoy Mason," the reader acquires firsthand information.⁴⁹ He declares that he came for a short vacation from his Houston pastorate to test the climate for his wife's health, and on arriving he was met at the railway station by a committee of the brethren, who

⁴⁶When Mr. Sanders was in the Confederate army his wife received an erroneous report that he had been killed, and desiring to surprise her, he did not announce his return. He slipped into the house. The shock was too great and she never recovered, so she was placed in the State Institution at Austin. Mr. Sanders made his home in the Capitol City in order to be near her. He was very reticent in relating the experience and Mr. Hall remarks that, "I only heard him tell of the tragedy twice." Hall, Texas Disciples, 168.

⁴⁷Wauchope, "Memoirs."

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹Bertha Mason Fuller, "Jacob Caswell McCoy Mason" (unpublished Master's thesis, Brite College of the Bible, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, Texas, 1953), 131-134.

invited him to preach during his stay. They were still meeting in the small paint shop. Upon entering the place of worship, which Mr. Mason later termed a hot box, he inquired, "What have you been doing that you should hide out like this?" They replied, "We are few in number and this is the best that we can do." Mr. Mason answered, "You will always be few in number if you continue meeting in a place like this."⁵⁰ Immediately he advised them to buy a lot in the center of town, but the leaders were positive that J. C. Mason was expecting the impossible of them. Nevertheless, the great organizer approached Millard Patterson, who at the time was an elder, and persuaded him to require his secretary to draw up a subscription sheet, and at the same time to head the list with his donation. After some hesitation the lawyer complied with the minister's request and started the subscriptions with \$1,000. Reverend Mason then took the sheet the next week and proceeded to canvass the business places, and on the following Sunday morning he presented to an astounded congregation the list of those who had subscribed \$1,800 toward the purchase of the downtown site. He had needed \$2,000 for the plot at 107 Myrtle Avenue, and on hearing the reading, an unidentified lawyer in the congregation

⁵⁰Ibid.