

# Museum News: Chapel Car *Good Will* - First Church in Sanderson

By C. W. (Bill) Smith, curator

Terrell County Memorial Museum

As railroads began to push through the western states a breed of tough, hard-drinking, brawling railroad men followed the work. Railroad towns such as Sanderson sprang into existence overnight, mostly populated by men and lacking the grace and civility of a woman's touch.

In fact, the railroad towns were no place for civilized ladies. Sanderson was so dangerous and lawless that women could not walk the streets unchaperoned. Murders and shootouts were frequent, and gambling, drinking and prostitution were rampant in the young town.

Town leaders such as Charlie Wilson, who was himself a saloon man, recognized that the town would not ever amount to anything unless the lawless element was brought under control. He hit on the idea of presenting free lots to churches if they would build in Sanderson. He felt that the civilizing influence of people of faith was needed to bridle the lusts of the men.

In 1895 the American Baptist Publication Society contracted with the Barney & Smith Car Company of Dayton, Ohio to build the chapel car *Good Will* for \$7500. At its completion it was dedicated at Saratoga Springs, NY, and sent to Texas to begin its work under the Baptist General Convention of Texas. Of the thirteen chapel cars on the rails, seven were Baptist - *Evangel*, *Emmanuel*, *Glad Tidings*, *Good Will*, *Messenger of Peace*, *Herald of Hope* and *Grace* - three were Episcopal - *Church of the Advent*, *The Bishop's Chapel Car* and an unnamed early car - three were Catholic - *St. Anthony*, *St. Peter* and *St. Paul*.

Under the leadership of 14 pastors during its life from 1895 until 1938 when it was retired from service, *Good Will* served in Texas, Missouri, Colorado, Nevada, Idaho, Oregon and California.

On January 10, 1900, the *Good Will* made its way west to Sanderson to work with the railroad men and the few families that inhabited the small town. It had already established missions in Del Rio and Comstock. On board were the Reverend E. G. Townsend and his assistant T. Moffett. Townsend's first wife had died in childbirth, but he brought his new wife along.

The *Good Will* was parked in the train yard between the roundhouse and depot and men and boys were encouraged to attend the meetings. At the roundhouse, alone, 250 men were employed who worked around the clock, keeping the steam locomotives in good repair. There was also a large crew of car knockers, men responsible for repairing the rail cars and providing routine maintenance. Add to that the track maintenance crews, clerks, depot personnel, telegraphers, porters, depot restaurant workers and the train crews themselves...engineers, brakemen, and conductors...there were upwards of 500 men working out of Sanderson.

The public was not discouraged from attending the meetings, but women's and children's meetings were held separately from the men. Elli Moore Townsend was a gifted speaker and stepped in to oversee that work.

Since the men worked around the clock, meetings were held for each shift, and amazingly, attendance was good. The few days that *Good Will* was in Sanderson, a fledgling mission church was established and the people were greatly encouraged to continue.

Shortly after the *Good Will* left town, the Townsends resigned from the chapel car ministry and moved to Waco to pastor the East Waco Baptist Church. He and his wife would become instrumental in the creation of The University of Mary Hardin-Baylor at Belton. On the campus of Mary Hardin-Baylor, the Townsend Library is dedicated to E. G. and Elli Moore Townsend.

Later that year, in September, 1900, the *Good Will* was sent to Galveston for repairs, just in time to be inundated by the worst natural disaster in American history, the Great Storm of Galveston. The *Good Will* was overturned and dumped into the water and suffered extensive damage to its wood portions. As part of the repairs previous to the storm, the windows had been removed for cleaning and painting. Subsequently, the car was flooded by torrential rains.

After two months in the repair shop, the *Good Will* returned to service where it helped in South Texas relief work.



*A group of men and boys crowd around the observation deck of the Chapel Car Good Will, enlisted by the Baptist General Convention of Texas to bring the Gospel to the far reaches of the West Texas frontier. Dedicated as a church on wheels, technically, it was the first church building in Sanderson. The Good Will traveled all over the state of Texas, wherever rails ran, then toured the next forty years throughout the western US. It visited Sanderson in January of 1900.*

In 1905, its job in Texas completed, the *Good Will* moved on to Missouri and then to Colorado in 1906. In the next 32 years it traveled across the West, spreading the Gospel in Nevada, Idaho, Oregon and California, under a series of pastors.

In most places it was greeted with joy by the citizens, but in some places the work did not advance and they “shook off the dust (of that place) from their feet” and moved on.

One particularly wicked place was Astoria, Oregon. Astoria’s bad reputation began in the late 1800s when Finnish fishermen moved to the area. One historian states that the young fishermen put in long hours, and for recreation drifted to the saloons and “hurdy gurdy” houses (dance halls.) Astoria was known as one of the wickedest cities in the world. Its red light district was the site of numerous “cat houses,” otherwise known as “female boarding houses.” It was a dangerous thing for a young man to visit the saloons and boarding houses of Astoria. They were in danger of being Shanghaied, kidnapped and forced to work on sailing ships for months or years.

In 1917 *Good Will* was cast into this den of iniquity and began its work in earnest. Reverend W. C. Driver, who was stationed on the *Good Will* with Mrs. Driver, reported, “Two years ago it was the worse saloon, gambling, and prostitute camp on the Coast—Public dance halls with women dancing nude every day. It is a little better now and is being reformed and rebuilt on cleaner lines.” Unfortunately, evil in Astoria was too strong, the work did not fare well and soon the *Good Will* was heading to greener pastures.

For the next twenty years the *Good Will* worked the West Coast in Washington, Oregon and California. In 1937, with the old wooden car nearing the end of its useful life, the Baptists decided to remove it from service. It was given to the Northern California Baptist Convention to be used as a home and headquarters for the last chapel car worker in 1938. The car was moved to a spot behind a hotel in Boyes Hot Springs, California, near San Francisco, and there it remained for the next sixty years.

During that period, it was used by the US Navy as a press car and by neighborhood children as a playroom.

When it was discovered by historians in 1998, plans were made to have the car restored. It was moved to a California railroad society’s restoration facility and work continues, as funds are available.

The *Good Will* and the 12 other chapel cars served with distinction. Through their ministries the church was spread to outlying parts of frontier areas that would have had no other opportunity to hear the Gospel preached. Even our own town of Sanderson was touched by this ministry, and perhaps the very seeds of our religious institutions were planted by these faithful servants.