

Museum News: The Sanderson Methodist Church

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

Methodist work in Sanderson probably pre-dates 1900 when the Methodist Episcopal Church, South was very active in West Texas. Circuit-riding preachers ministered to several congregations and work all along the Rio Grande began in earnest in 1859 with the founding of the Rio Grande Mission.

Methodist work in Texas during the Spanish and Mexican colonial period was hampered by rules from the host countries that allowed only Catholics to conduct services. But after the Texas Revolution missionary work in Texas exploded, with many ministers being sent from surrounding Southern states. At one point Methodists became the state's largest denomination.

Mexican Methodist work began in 1874 with founding of Hispanic congregations and organized in 1885 as a conference. Most certainly circuit-riding preachers passed through the new town of Sanderson but not enough Methodists were present to build a church.

In 1900, Charlie Wilson, founder of Sanderson and principal landowner of the town site, donated lots at the corner of Pine and Persimmon to folks wanting to build a structure for the church. Work was not completed until 1905, just about the time when Terrell County came into existence. As with other church buildings in Sanderson, labor and materials were donated or paid for as bought until the building was completed and debt-free.

The first pastor of the church was a Reverend Cox, who probably was a circuit-rider who also served other congregations. For several years the new building was used by other denominations until their buildings could be completed. A union Sunday school was conducted in Sanderson for years among the Protestant churches as they pooled funding and expertise to instruct their members. As buildings and congregations were completed the union Sunday school was disbanded and each denomination had its own Sunday school.

For several years the small church building had no steeple or bell. In 1910, building contractor Mr. Shirley Martin built a steeple and furnished the top of the spire with a croquet ball, donated by a young Willie Banner as he knocked the ball down the street in front of the building.

For many years the Methodists had a very active congregation with men's and women's societies, missionary unions, Epworth Leagues for young people and children's Sunday schools and groups. The churches in Sanderson, including the Methodist Church, were the center of life for young people.

In 1945 the bustling congregation removed the old building and built a new one of native stone with beautiful stained glass windows. A fellowship hall was joined to the rear of this building and the parsonage was remodeled. Today, this building still serves its congregation as the church has moved into the 21st Century.

