

Museum News: First Presbyterian Church

By C. W. (Bill) Smith

From the very earliest modern settlement of Terrell County, Presbyterians have been present. For the first thirty years services were held sporadically as itinerant preachers and missionaries moved through the area trying to establish a presence and build churches, but the population was too small to warrant a full-fledged congregation.

In 1908 the Reverend William Matthews came to Sanderson to visit his father, who ran a very well known saloon in town (in competition with at least six others.) Alcohol was taking its toll and good-hearted Presbyterians longed for a church home that could help offset the wild behavior and bad reputation of the town. They also wanted a Sunday school for the training of their children, and they yearned for the Word of God.

Rev. Matthews liked the town and was convinced to hold a series of meetings to stir up interest and perhaps start a new church. Protracted meetings were common among all the churches in those days and the local skating rink at 2nd and Hackberry was secured for the services. The rink, sitting where the old Terrell County ISD shop sits today, had been built in 1902 and was used for many public meetings and social gatherings.

After a two-week series of daily meetings, the effort was pronounced a success. Thirty-one persons signed a petition to the Presbyterian organization requesting that a church be started in Sanderson, with Rev. Matthews as pastor. Rev. Matthews, who was pastor at Leander at the time, resigned his position there and agreed to take on the new Sanderson Church. In February of 1909 the petition was presented to the annual meeting in San Antonio and approved. Matthews was entered into the Presbytery of Western Texas to give him authority and the work continued in earnest.

Over the next year the church began to build a new structure at Persimmon and Hackberry on land donated by Chris Gates, postmaster of Sanderson and charter member. It was finished and dedicated in 1910 and was used not only for Presbyterian services but, with construction of a two-storey addition, was used for a Union Sunday school of many denominations, until other churches were constructed and devised their own Sunday schools.

A principal member and organist/pianist for the new church was Mrs. T. L. des Landes, a refined English lady with much professional musical talent. The des Landes came to Sanderson in 1902 and lived in town until 1926 when she and her husband moved to their ranch in eastern Brewster County. Mrs. des Landes was quite a Victorian lady, in her dress and her mannerisms and her huge hats with prominent ostrich feather adornments. She played on many occasions for other services and meetings in Sanderson, but was a mainstay at the Presbyterian Church. Still, whenever she was in town she could be relied on for musical accompaniment. She also taught private lessons and was a long-time Sunday school teacher at the Presbyterian Church. Mr. des Landes died in 1929 and Mrs. des Landes moved to live with her son in El Paso. She passed away in 1930 and she and her husband are interred at Cedar Grove.

In the mid 1940s Mary E. Mitchell, wife of Alexander Mitchell of the prominent ranching family, purchased property at 2nd and Richard St. and instigated the building of a manse for the Presbyterian Church. Then the church began a building program to erect a new sanctuary. Much of the money was raised to finance the program, but Mrs. Mitchell generously paid off the final indebtedness to make the church debt-free. The Mitchells, along with the Downies and other historic ranch families, have been pillars of the Presbyterian Church in Sanderson.

Many prominent town and ranch families called the Presbyterian Church their home. As with other denominations, it was the center of life for many families. An important organization for the ladies of the Church was the Women's Auxiliary, organized in 1922. Youth and teen groups also worked



in conjunction with the Sunday school to make a rich and full life for its congregants. With a rich history and proud traditions, the Presbyterian Church has shepherded its congregation into the 21st Century and continues to serve its mission in Sanderson and Terrell County with hearty fervor.