

GOD'S EMISSARIES

What was this new religion, Christianity? Since landing and beginning colonization in the 1600s, white men had been attempting to “convert” Native Americans to a religious belief focusing on one God. The beliefs and rituals of Indian nations throughout North America were diverse because of the isolation of different tribes, but one common thread prevailed, all beliefs were closely connected to the land and the supernatural. Whether that involved one god or several varied. In any event, worship and the practice of religion was not separated from one’s daily life in Indian lore, but these newcomers worshiped in buildings, prayed in groups, and on occasion, tortured, banished, even burned alive, those who they termed “beyond redemption.” In contrast, Native American tribes had battled for centuries over territory or possessions, taking hostages, looting enemy villages and slaughtering the opposition, but there was no motivation toward conquering others simply to force upon them one concept of the hereafter.

But, over time these European “men of God” had reconstituted their religious fervor, recognizing that punishment didn’t win converts and now, in the early 1800s, as the Cherokees were being pressured to leave their land in Georgia, “God’s Emissaries” went with them. During this time, Brainerd Mission, sponsored by the United Foreign Missionary Society, had been constructed near Chattanooga. The Brainerd missionaries’ role was not only to promote the doctrine of Christianity, but the education of children and encouragement for adults to become stewards of the land. They had watched as government agents had systematically stolen Cherokee land and they had become aligned with the tribesmen, even arrested and jailed for supporting them. These men and their wives were stalwart, rugged pioneers as their actions demonstrated. Devoted to their parishioners, their ministry bore scant resemblance to those of plastic televangelists of today, preaching to mega crowds in surreal surroundings. Emissaries of the 1800s “walked the walk,” ministering one on one, setting examples and working to improve the deprivations of that era. For example, the Reverend Daniel Butrick and his wife Sarah traveled with tribesmen, administering to their needs on the northernmost route of The Trail of Tears during the winter of 1838 – 39. Afterwards the couple established a mission station on Beatty’s Prairie east of Jay. The Reverend Epaphras Chapman from Connecticut scouted dangerous Osage country alone before determining the eventual site of Union Mission in Mayes County. Various Christian missionaries accompanied Western Cherokees when they began moving from their native lands in Georgia and Tennessee to Arkansas Territory shortly after the turn of the century. So by the time remaining tribesmen were eventually forced to move, these Christian ministers were on hand to greet that mass of reluctant Cherokees.

Union Mission was the first to be established in what later would become Indian Territory. It was built in 1820, near the Grand River, 25 miles north of the confluence of the Arkansas, Verdigris and Grand Rivers known as Three Forks. The objective of this mission was not only to convert the Osage to Christianity, but convince them to settle and farm. Chapman’s efforts might be sited as the first example in Oklahoma of a clash between religion and tradition, at least as it affected commerce. The Reverend and his

cohorts soon discovered that they not only had to overcome Osage customs, but also resistance from prominent traders such as A. P. Chouteau and Nathan Pryor. These businessmen wanted the warriors to continue the nomadic ways to hunt, not learn to farm, in order to provide furs and skins for their businesses.

Despite their best efforts, the preachers did not always succeed for reasons beyond their control. In 1823, the Reverend William Montgomery and William Requa established a branch of the Union Mission as a project to demonstrate to the Osage how they could improve their circumstances by farming. The enthusiastic founders built a new mission five miles north of Union and named it Hopefield. As before, there was resistance to this idea of farming instead of hunting. These Indian farmers were scorned by fellow tribesmen who derisively taunted and occasionally beat them, calling them “field makers.” Still, the Hopefield experiment was meeting its objective until a government treaty in 1828 ceded their Osage land to the Cherokees. Not to be thwarted, Montgomery and Requa moved their operation which they called “New Hopefield,” further north near the confluence of Cabin Creek on the west side of the Grand River. But disaster struck again, this time in the form of cholera, and by 1836 disease and further treaty issues saw the end of the experiment.

Dwight Mission, named for Reverend Timothy Dwight of Yale University, is another example of an enclave dedicated to religion in the region. Founded for Cherokee settlers in western Arkansas in 1820, it was moved to Indian Territory and reopened on Salisaw Creek near today’s Vian in 1829, and began accepting students for schooling in 1830. The mission’s school was eventually closed in 1948, but the facility still functions today as a retreat and conference center under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church.

A legion of “God’s Emissaries” built missions in Indian Territory, taught Christian principles to those who would be taught and frequently died from disease or were killed for their convictions. History tends to gravitate toward events such as clashes of armies, political ideologies, or the achievement of individuals, But honor and recognition should also be given to these stalwart men and women, “Gods Emissaries,” who fought a different and frequently lonesome battle, armed only with their convictions and accepting victory one individual at a time.