

**Central Presbyterian Church**

**A Historical Perspective: 1888-1988**

**By Dave Ross**

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# Introduction

On April 29, 1988, Central Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas, celebrated its 100th birthday. In April of 1987, the Session asked me to be chairperson of the centennial celebrations. One of their requests was a church history. This book is the result. Our "book committee" was composed of Colleen (Newbold) Perry, Dave Ross and John Whitt. Many hours were spent in research and note taking before the actual writing could be started. Dave Ross is the author of the book, but it would not have been possible without much teamwork. We spent many happy hours together to bring this book into existence. We have enjoyed it; we hope you enjoy reading it.

Mary Ann Lyon

Centennial Events

Chairperson, October 1988

## Acknowledgements:

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## **Preface**

As dutifully recounted by the Clerk of Session, church minutes are often dull and sketchy, and usually reflect none of the contradicting emotions that have affected all Ruling Elders of the past century of our church. In this book, we tried to interpret the results of those meetings, but could not always explain why something happened or what conflicts arose along the way to the solution. Over the years, Elders resigned, motions were tabled and forgotten, and many "crises" were somehow resolved, often without any of the details that make for exciting reading. So we tried to make our book more meaningful by presenting the changing local and national canvas on which our church history was painted. Thus we tried to capture glimpses of Fort Smith and United States history along the way - to put our church happenings into some sort of perspective. Remember, too, that the many Pastors, Elders, Deacons and others who served this church were human -- and so are we, the writers. Thus we have undoubtedly erred in omitting certain facts or incidents we were not aware of, or because in our judgement we considered them not to be important. With out limited time and vision, we have tried to give you our best.

Mary Ann Lyon, Centennial Events Chairperson

John Whitt, History Chairman

Colleen (Newbold) Perry, Editor

Dave Ross, Author

## Chapter I – The Beginning: 1888-1900

A strong west wind and billowy gray clouds brought a hint of even more rain to fall on the muddy, puddle-filled streets of Fort Smith. Wagons creaked slowly through the quagmire on Garrison Avenue, spattering mud on passing horseback riders and pedestrians who ventured to close to the edge of the gritty board sidewalks that flanked the damp buildings.

On this particular soggy Sunday morning -- April 29, 1888 -- a small group of men and women slowly made their way up the dark and narrow stairs on the dingy second floor storeroom between 7th and 8th streets on Garrison. Representing almost a cross-section of the city's diverse society, some spoke excitedly while others seemed grim. It was a solemn occasion -- the forming of a new church.

Calling the meeting to order was the young Reverend S.H. McElvain, four years out of the Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, Ohio. After some discussion, interspersed with devotional oratory, 39 Fort Smith residents affixed their signatures to a petition calling themselves the "Cumberland Presbyterian Church." As reported a week later in the FORT SMITH ELEVATOR it was agreed " ... the services of the church will be held, until the building is completed, at the old skating rink of 8th Street."

The first Ruling Elders were Lewis Middleton, John H. McClure and C.L. Davis. William Hendricks and A. Howen were elected Deacons, but only McClure and Davis had been previously ordained. The others were ordained the first Sunday in May.

It may never be known if any of the 39 people forming the new Cumberland Church were former members of Fort Smith's established First Presbyterian Church, but it is possible. The Reverend W.A. Sample had announced his retirement from First Presbyterian barely two weeks earlier, after almost 30 years in the pulpit of the striking red brick church at which is now North 8th and "B" streets, and perhaps some members chose his departure to cast their lot with the new church. One may also never know the true relationship between the congregations of the two Presbyterian churches in 1888, because of the differences in their theological history of almost 75 years.

Cumberland's took their name from the Presbytery in eastern Kentucky and Tennessee that defied their governing body, the Synod of Kentucky, in the very early 1800s. According to the HISTORICAL ATLAS OF RELIGION IN AMERICA, "... the Cumberlands had had much success with revivals, and relaxed some of the educational requirements for the ministry," so as to faster spread their fervor to the settlers pushing west.

The General Assembly supported the Kentucky Synod's actions, and dissolved the Cumberland Presbytery in 1806. Within four years, Cumberland became an independent Presbytery. By 1813 they had become an independent Synod and their movement spread rapidly. A decade later, their symbol -- the circuit-riding minister -- was a fixture in new

Presbyterian churches in the South. On this fateful April Sunday in 1888, the 39 new Cumberland members in Fort Smith joined a brotherhood of about 2,500 churches with a total membership of well over 100,000 worshippers.

At the end of services many people lingered to talk, for much was happening. The women compared inconveniences suffered from the more than three inches of rain that deluged the city the day before, making travel almost impossible at times. Men discussed how the storm had washed out three Frisco bridges in Indian Territory between Antlers and Talihina.

One man ventured the weekend downpour was the "wrath of an angry God," for the taking of three lives in Judge Isaac C. Parker's federal court on Friday. Three desperadoes -- Hill, Moss and Crow -- went to the gallows for recent murders committed in Indian Territory. A large crowd had witnessed the event, and perhaps some of the spectators were among those at the new church on Sunday.

Other talk was of railroads and oil. The Chamber of Commerce has held a meeting a week earlier to raise \$10,000 for subscriptions in the planned Fort Smith, Paris and Dardanelle Railroad. Builder L.L. Busch had been astonished at the lack of interest, and the project had been quietly dropped.

Perhaps investment funds were being held in readiness for something else. There were reports about oil being discovered in Scott County. The ELEVATOR said, "... much excitement over recent discoveries of oil-bearing rock in the southwest part of the county. Machinery has been purchased and operations will begin in a short time."

[PHOTO from page 3 here ... Cutline ... Old Commissary Building at the first fort in Fort Smith, circa 1893.]

A Fort Smith man had to invest wisely in the spring of 1888, for the city was in the midst of a building boom. A glittering Grand Opera House at 5th and Garrison streets had been completed just the year before, about the time the city's first hospital, St. John's, was formally opened to the public. The beautiful LeFlore Hotel was opened on Garrison, which sparkled magically at night with the installation of arc lamp electric lights for the first time in Fort Smith. Business boomed along Towson Avenue, too, with scores of livery stables, blacksmith shops, buggy makers and saddlers lining the thoroughfare to where it joined the trail to Texas. Nor was Fort Smith neglecting education. Work was

nearly finished on the beautiful two-story brick Duval School on North 14th, an eight-room showplace built for the staggering cost of \$21,000!

Business reports in 1888 estimated Fort Smith's population at about 20,000; a dramatic increase from the approximate 3,000 shown in the 1880 census. At the time, the city was the sixth largest in Arkansas. However, Fort Smith boosters were confident the boom had lifted their city past Eureka Springs, Hot Springs, Pine Bluff and Helena, into second place. (The federal census two years later showed Fort Smith with 11,311 residents -- not the 20,000 hoped for -- but enough to prove the city was the second largest in Arkansas.)

The fledgling Cumberland Church grew slowly but steadily during those two years. A "Sabbath School" was organized during the first year and faithfully supported. Deacons were given the responsibility of collecting rent on the property the church owned at what is now 9th and "B" Street. During May and June of the first year they collected \$27.50, which went toward Pastor McElvain's salary. For July and August he received another \$42.60.

Fortunately, the Presbytery General Assembly notified the church it was supplementing his salary an extra \$25 per month. Presbytery also agreed to advance Cumberland a \$1,000 loan to complete the new church. One report in the HISTORY OF FORT SMITH in 1889 said the Cumberland members were still worshipping in a hall "... have completed the basement of a new stone edifice at 9th and Mulberry."

When the church was about a year old, land fever swept Fort Smith, and some residents left for Indian Territory to take advantage of the federal government's offer. At noon on April 22, 1889, the heartland of the Oklahoma Territory was thrown open for settlement. Thousands of land-hungry settlers had lined up on the borders, and by nightfall Oklahoma City and Guthrie had several thousand residents.

Speculation was building in Sebastian County, too, where large amounts of coal had been discovered a few years before. The St. Louis, Iron Mountain and Southern Railroad opened a line to the Lower Township connecting Fort Smith and Greenwood so the coal could be mined and distributed more easily.

The young church continued to struggle financially, in spite of the fact that more than 30 new members were added to the rolls before 1890. Deacons informed the congregation they needed \$1.50 per month from each member in order to pay the pastor and maintain the church.

Just before Christmas of that year, the Session ordered an unnamed young man to appear before them and answer charges that he was "guilty of immoral and unchristian conduct." He was accused of "publicly and notoriously associating with a lewd woman." The member refused on three successive occasions to meet with the Session to answer the charges, so the governing body voted to suspend him from all the rights and privileges of the church.

On May 27, 1891, the link between Fort Smith and the Cherokee nation was strengthened with the opening of the Gould Railroad and Highway Bridge across the Arkansas River. A citywide celebration included parades, dances and other activities. Fort Smith's elite and distinguished guests sat down to a huge banquet featuring barbecued spring lamb, and later heard speeches by Cherokee chief John Ross and Choctaw chief Colonel Campbell LeFlore. A large fireworks display ended the festivities.

The tiny church continued to take in new members from all over the Southwest. In June of 1891, Mrs. Alma Smalley's membership application was presented to the Session, and "... upon recommendation of her Christian character, she was received into membership, even though she is now lying dangerously ill and unable to present herself in person before the Session." The Moderator was instructed to "... visit her and inform her of the actions of the church."

Because of Cumberland's increase in membership, the Session continued to collect money for construction of a permanent church on Lot 6 in Block 51, of what is now 9th and "B" streets. In April of 1892, the congregation voted to set up a three-member Board of Trustees, to hold and secure church property. In July, a congregational meeting was called to "take action in the matter of disposing of Lot 6 on Block 49, to raise money for the new church."

The plan adopted put the Cumberland Church into the stock market. Trustees were instructed to issue 160 shares of stock (par value \$25) based on Lot 6, and sell them for the "best available price." The money was to be given to the Building Committee to aid in the construction of the new church. There is no record of the shares sold, or what was paid for them.

Perhaps it is only coincidental that two unnamed trustees resigned on December 28th, with no reason given. However, on February 13, 1893, the Cumberland congregation came up with a new plan to finance construction. Lot 6 on Block 49 was to be used as security for a \$1,000 loan, with the money to be turned over to the Building Committee.

Fort Smith continued to grow numerically and culturally. The Fortnightly Club, a local literary group, helped organize the first City Library in October of 1891. In the summer of 1892, St. John's Hospital moved from its outgrown location at 302 North 2nd, to the "... large, comfortable residence property of D.F. Rogers, on the corner of 4th and Oak streets. The new home has nine or 10 large rooms and is fully equipped with all modern conveniences." (The ELEVATOR)

The Cumberland Session continued to censure members who got out of line. On January 11, 1893, they voted to remove the name of one lady member from the rolls for "...gross, notorious and immoral conduct." Pastor McElvain was instructed to announce the name from his pulpit the following Sunday.

Cumberland's chances of completing a new church in 1893 were dashed when a stock market panic and then recession swept across the country. Money became scarce and

building activity slowed. Even in Fort Smith, property values tumbled almost overnight. In fact, church members had trouble providing Pastor McElvain's salary. In late December, the congregation approved adding a new Elder and a new Deacon, primarily to help secure church contributions. Ordained the following Sunday were T.P. McGinnis as Elder, and T.J. Prather as Deacon, but the financial picture continued to get worse.

On January 3, 1894, the Session ordered that, "the money raised for the payment of rents past due and appropriated for other purposes be replaced by the Deacons as soon as it can be conveniently raised." During the March Session meeting, it was reported that collections for support of the pastor were "in arrears." It was suggested that each Elder appoint a committee of "two ladies in his district to canvas said district to procure subscriptions for support of the pastor."

At some point during the spring or summer of 1894, the Reverend McElvain apparently resigned, perhaps to avert any financial embarrassment on behalf of his congregation. According to Session records, the exact date or specific reasons were not mentioned. Yet McElvain is listed present and Moderator of the Session until June of 1895.

In November of 1894, the Deacons were instructed by the Session to canvas the congregation to raise money for the pastor's salary for 1895. The goal was \$720, with the view of "... relinquishing contributions from the Board of Missions for this purpose." A meeting in early January showed total contributions of \$419.

Sometime during this period of financial crisis, the call went out for a new minister to replace Pastor McElvain. Work on the new church had been stopped, though the congregation continued to hold services at the construction site at 9th and "B." Walls were up and a roof was in place, but the flooring was incomplete.

The search for a new minister, made more complicated by Cumberland's shaky financial situation, dragged through the winter and spring. On June 9, 1895, the Session voted to call the Reverend F.M. Wylie, another graduate from the Lane Theological Seminary, at a salary of \$35 per month. The Reverend Wylie had preached regularly at Cumberland churches in Beebee and Antioch, Arkansas, before his calling to Fort Smith. In his note, he indicated his first sermon, "A Mind to Work," was presented on August 4, 1895, in a service attended by about 100 people. During the first week of the new year, the church held an extensive revival in which Wylie reportedly preached "about 25 times."

[Photo on page 7 here -- cutline -- Second fort at Fort Smith, circa 1870]

Despite the fundamentalism that swept the Fort Smith area early in 1896, the area's reputation as a bastion for law and order was gradually changing. Not long after the Reverend Wylie ascended the Cumberland pulpit, a gang of vengeful young outlaws began a two-week swath of terror in the nearby Creek Nation, in what is now in Oklahoma. Federal marshals sent out by Judge Isaac Parker caught the desperados and brought them back to Fort Smith. The five members of the infamous Buck Gang were quickly tried, found guilty and hung en masse on September 25th.

While the Cumberland Session voted in January of 1896 to add member Wallace Hartsell as an extra Deacon, another area outlaw was making headlines in Fort Smith and Indian Territory. "Cherokee Bill" was being held in jail while he appealed a death sentence handed down by Judge Parker. But during a later escape attempt, Bill shot and killed deputy marshal Larry Keating. So on March 17th, Cherokee Bill paid with his own life -- the next-to-the-last man to die on the Fort Smith gallows.

Judge Parker's grip on law and order in the Indian Nation was waning after more than 20 years on the bench. Congress voted in March to abolish the Western Arkansas District Court, to be replaced in September by three federal courts to continue justice in the Indian Territory. When the reorganized U.S. District Court docket for November was published in the FORT SMITH ELEVATOR in early October, it was noted that Judge Isaac Parker would not be presiding. The 58-year-old former Congressman was reported to be "... in ill health and recuperating at his home." His health had reportedly ebbed and flowed for several weeks. Sometime during the night of November 16th, he died. The ELEVATOR listed the cause of death as "Bright's Disease and a fatty condition of the heart," but many speculated it was a heart broken by the restructuring of his court's jurisdiction a few months earlier.

Judge Parker had devoted his life to his judicial work. While feared by criminals for his sternness, he was respected by most Fort Smith citizens, and served on the boards of the new Public Library, and the reorganized St. John's Hospital, the forerunner of Sparks. During Judge Parker's 21-year tenure on the bench that began in 1875, he had 13,400 cases docketed and imposed 9,454 sentences. Of those, 344 defendants were charged with offenses punishable by death, and 160 were sentenced to hang. In recounting Judge Parker's accomplishments, the ELEVATOR continued, "Parker's court was open round-the-clock, with no holidays except Sundays and Christmas, 8 a.m. until dark. Conditions could have been much worse, if Judge Parker had not been stern." He was buried in the National Cemetery, marking the beginning of a Fort Smith legend.

Although church records are incomplete, sometime early in 1897, the permanent Cumberland Presbyterian church building at North 9th and "B" was somehow completed. The Reverend Wylie noted that February 21st was the last Sunday services in the basement of the old church. Two weeks later, March 7th, he excitedly reported his "first sermon in the new church.

Amid the excitement over a new sanctuary, the Reverend Wylie continued to preach enthusiastically for his congregation. He noted that on April 25th, 100 people attended, and he called it "his best sermon yet." On June 2nd, he performed the wedding service for Merrit Trowbridge and Mary Sengel, in the Pastor's home at 623 13th Street. In late October, Reverend Wylie preached to prisoners in the jail at the U.S. courthouse and reported, "... several men gave their hand in prayer." He topped off the year with a temperance sermon in November.

[Photo on page 9 here ... outline ... Original Cumberland Presbyterian Church at North 9th and "B" built in 1897. The interior has been renovated and today serves as a business complex.]

January 11, 1898, dawned unusually warm and muggy for winter. By nightfall, towering thunderstorms prowled in Indian Territory and gradually edged into the Fort Smith area. The ELEVATOR reported later, "... at 11:20 there was a momentary lull. This was followed by a heavy dull grinding rumble that gave notice of the approach of the cyclone fiend." At that moment, a full-fledged tornado ripped into Fort Smith, striking first the national cemetery, then skipping northeast to damage the Immaculate Conception Church. According to newspaper reports, the funnel cut a swatch from 220 to 500 yards wide, and the First Baptist Church was "reduced to kindling wood." The new Fort Smith High School building was also heavily damaged.

[Photo on page 10 here ... outline ... Texas Corner on Garrison Avenue looking west after the Fort Smith tornado in January 1898. (Courtesy Old Fort Museum)]

The FORT SMITH ELEVATOR headline screamed "52 People Are Dead;" injuries and damages made the destruction seem even worse. The storm hit the downtown Wellington Hotel full blast. The wreckage caught fire and many guests, trapped by the rubble, perished in the blaze. The ELEVATOR reported many victims were encased in plaster when the ceiling material was mixed with water from the fireman's hoses.

Yet the storm was capricious. The ELEVATOR reported, a man identified as Joseph Head "... woke up after the storm, stark naked in the middle of Towson Avenue. Fortunately, the owner of Marks Clothing Store opened up and ended the young man's embarrassment."

Cumberland Presbyterian and many of the other Fort Smith churches quickly opened their doors to house and eventually feed the dazed survivors. The ELEVATOR later printed a lengthy list of the condition of the survivors, and a separate column indicated their intended relief, some as little as \$10.

## Chapter II - Establishing Roots: 1900-1918

Fort Smith residents and those around the nation eagerly awaited the start of the Twentieth Century, which was to begin January 1, 1900, (or January 1, 1901, according to some calculations). Most people preferred the earlier date, and on New Year's Eve of 1899, gala "watch parties" were the rage in the fancy Fort Smith homes now comprising the city's National Historic District. Precisely at midnight, glasses were raised to toast the new century, while outside "... the air was filled with exploding firecrackers, bells, gun shots and even boat whistles."

[Photo on page 11 -- cutline -- Hotel Main on Garrison Avenue in downtown Fort Smith, a landmark attraction for many years. (Courtesy Old Fort Museum)]

On January 5th, the ELEVATOR philosophically compared the new century with the one just ended. "The people who lived at the beginning of the 19th Century had no railroads, no telegraph and no newspapers worth mentioning. They were ignorant of the sewing machine and knew nothing of the typewriter. They never had their photographs taken, and did not dream the sun could come down and make pictures more perfect than any artist could produce. They had never seen a steamboat, they had no carpet on their floors, and wallpapers were yet to be thought of."

Sometime thereafter, the Reverend Wylie left the Cumberland pulpit for a church in Morrilton, Arkansas. The Presbytery "loaned" the Reverend Doctor F.R. Earle to supply the church during 1900 and 1901. Dr. Earle was the third Cumberland pastor to have graduated from the Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati, having done so in 1888.

The turn of the century was an exciting time to be alive! In her HISTORY OF SPARKS HOSPITAL, Ellen Sue Blakely reports, "... the star attraction of Fort Smith's 1900 Street Fair was the town's first automobile, owned and built by Gus Boehmer." Within a few years, more and more of them appeared, "roaring up and down the dusty streets at astonishing speeds of 15 miles per hour!"

By 1902, something else was competing with Fort Smith horses as a model of local transportation. The Fort Smith Light and Traction Company opened electric street car service. Regular routes were quickly extended to Van Buren; out Grand Avenue to what is now Waldron Road; along Towson Avenue to Arkoma; another out 21st street to the old Fair Grounds, and a fifth out Rogers Avenue to what is now Greenwood Road. Passengers could travel comfortably anywhere in the city for just one nickel.

Everything, it seemed, was moving. Ohio brothers Orville and Wilbur Wright were experimenting with a machine they hoped could help them fly. After months of trying, they made history on a North Carolina beach in late 1903. At that time, the Fort Smith Light and Traction Company was also working on another big project -- a fascinating

amusement park later to be called Electric Park. When it officially opened in 1904, it contained beautiful light displays, a casino, dance pavilion, roller coaster and a 2,000-set auditorium. Patrons crowded the company's streetcars for a half-hour ride to the landscaped grounds, which today are known as Kay Rodgers Park.

The Reverend J.A. McDonald became Cumberland's new minister in early 1902. The Session noted in January "... the church has purchased a new furnace at an installed price of \$257." It must have been a cold winter, because by March, the Deacons were directed to "provide a half ton of coal for the church." And as usual, they were also told to "... collect arrears from the congregation for the pastor's salary."

The Presbytery met at Mansfield that spring, about the time Deacon B.C. Covey was instructed to hire a church organist. In September, the Session reported, "Elders Ritter and Hendrix were appointed to secure a room for the ladies of the church to serve meals during the street fair."

In October of 1903, the Belle Point Hospital moved into a new three-story brick building at South 12th and "I" Streets. The SATURDAY CITY ITEM (newspaper) reported "... it has every modern appliance for the comfort of the patients and convenience of the physicians and nurses. The wards are cool and airy, and the operating rooms would alone well repay one for a visit to the institution."

At a meeting toward the end of the year, Cumberland Church members agreed to enlarge the Session and voted to adopt several resolutions. J.M. Wallace and C.M. Geren were added as Elders, while George Dobyms, Winn Blakely and J.H. Mastine were elected new Deacons. The resolutions approved were: (1) The treasurer report financial records every Wednesday; (2) Delinquent members names be given to the Deacons each quarter; (3) A secretary "keep careful track" of all weekly contributions; (4) The treasurer pay the pastor's salary once a week; (5) All reports shall be itemized; and (6) All church families should be given pledge envelopes. The Session also agreed Pastor McDonald's salary be set at \$1,000 per year.

The year 1906 was wrought with changes for the Cumberland Church in Fort Smith. Early that year, negotiations began between officials of the Presbyterian church of the United States of America and delegates of the national Cumberland organization. Within weeks they effected an agreement that eventually saw more than 1,000 Cumberland churches rejoin the Northern organization from which they had splintered a century earlier.

In April, while the debate to rejoin the USA Presybeterians raged, a couple of good things happened to ease the church's continuing financial problems. S.F. Stahle, C.M. Geren and George Dobyms presented a deed to the congregation for the church house and adjacent land. Mr. Stable and his wife were also thanked by the congregation for a gift of \$2,000 to pay off the church debt.

It was in the midst of Central's good fortune that San Francisco met with disaster when an early morning earthquake leveled much of the city, killing nearly 500 people. All across the country churches prayed for the survivors of the tragedy.

On May 24th, after a joint Session meeting between the Elders and Deacons, a new name was chosen for the church. It was to become the "Central Presbyterian Church, U.S.A." A special committee was appointed to spread the word and "handle the advertising."

Perhaps flush with a nearly balanced church budget for the first time in many years, Elders D.C. Smith and George Dobyms were appointed to examine Dr. Chapman's "Songs of Praise" -- hymnbooks selling at \$10 per 100. In September, the committee recommended buying the books.

Two months later, on November 11, 1906, the popular Reverend McDonald submitted his resignation, perhaps because as of October 1st, his salary was \$173 in arrears. The Session moved and seconded that his resignation not be accepted. But a week later, the Reverend McDonald again asked to resign, effective in December. This time, the Session accepted, but decided to borrow \$250 to "... bring his salary up to date."

It was indeed a hectic month for the church. At a congregational meeting following the services on November 25th, the Session urged members to "... unite our focus and secure an enterprising pastor to 'push Central to the front in the city,' as the field of work for this church was so great, and the future so bright." A committee was also appointed to write a note of thanks to Pastor McDonald, who had added 196 new members to the church rolls in four years.

On December 23rd, the Session agreed to wait until the following month to consider the application for the Reverend Leroy Coates. Yet one week later the Session changed its mind and ordered the Clerk to write Reverend Coates, notifying him of the church's acceptance. According to Session notes, he was to be paid \$100 per month, plus half of the pledges obtained from new members he brought into the church "... until he receives \$1,500 per annum." Little is known about the Reverend Coates, except that he was born in 1865 and attended Missouri Valley College in Marshall, Missouri. It appears he accomplished a great deal in his first months at Central.

In February, it was noted that the Session would "... arrange for assistance in a revival to start as soon as possible after the Presbytery meeting in Booneville." Two months later, a "Presbyterian Brotherhood" was formed at Central, with C.N. Geren named president. By May, the church activities had increased. A choir director named Johnson had been hired for \$10 per month, and a "committee of one" was named to confer with the Ladies Auxiliary about their request to plant flowers at the rear of the church. A.E. Donaghee was also asked to advise them "... not to go to the expense of putting the flowers out."

On May 27th, the Clerk of Session was told to write the Board of Missions in St. Louis with regard to the establishment of a mission in some part of Fort Smith. At the same meeting, it was decided to see about repairing the church basement. That summer, in

1907, the Session appointed another committee to find a suitable place for a church picnic, and a "general outing for the church ladies." It's not known where, or if, the outing took place. In the fall, Brother Wallace Clift was hired at \$75 per month to assist Pastor Coates and to lead the choir.

There had been an election in September to decide if residents of the Indian Territory and the Oklahoma Territory wanted statehood. The vote was overwhelmingly in favor in areas around Oklahoma City and Guthrie, but the 104,000 Indians in the east had been sharply divided on the issue. Many still held out hope for establishment of a separate Indian state called Sequoyah, and the vote on the new constitution was disputed in many locations. But statehood carried.

On November 16, 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt formally signed the bill admitting the two territories as the sovereign state of Oklahoma. The oaths of office were administered to Governor-elect Charles Haskell and others in Guthrie just before noon. The *SOUTHWEST AMERICAN* reported a few days later, "there was absolutely no ceremony."

Odie Faulk and Billy Jones indicated in their *ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF FORT SMITH* that statehood did not really halt Oklahoma business interests in Arkansas. "Fort Smith has been the merchandising center for the Five Civilized Tribes ... but with statehood those tribes ceased to exist as entities ... yet conditions in Oklahoma continued to favor the growth of business and industry across the state line." Their research continues, "Early laws of the Sooner State penalized businessmen, so they erected their factories just across the line in Fort Smith." Oklahomans voted for total prohibition, and as a result, thirsty Sooners fled across the river to do their drinking in the saloons along Garrison Avenue.

Meanwhile, financial problems continued as usual at Central. In December, the pastor's salary was \$50 in arrears, and an appointed committee could not find a "... suitable manse for Pastor Coates."

Two months later, in February, an influenza epidemic hit Fort Smith, and Central was buffeted by a scandal involving a Doctor G.W. Eickleberger, whose alleged "crime" was never truly revealed. According to the Session notes, Ruling Elders felt "... after checking, the best thing was to report the matter to the advisory board of Presbytery, and ask what steps to take." The vote was three in favor and four abstaining -- those four vehemently wanted it on record they had abstained -- in a pledge to abide by the decision of Presbytery.

The Session minutes continue, "A letter of endorsement for Brother Coates was read to the Session, and it was signed by all but two members. At that point, the discussion went into personalities by some present, and the Clerk left the meeting ... and as to what further action was taken in the matter, he (the clerk) cannot state." Precisely what the good Doctor Eickleberger was up to apparently has been lost to history.

About the time the church celebrated its 20th anniversary, members decided to put a concrete floor in the basement. In June, several Elders resigned and a staggered yearly plan of selection was adopted for the first time. Pastor Coates and Brother Clift were granted a month's leave "to hold a meeting in Idaho." Meanwhile, \$125 was raised to apply on their salaries. But the nature of their meeting was not recorded in the church minutes.

A couple of weeks later, the Session approved the granting of four scholarships to what is now the University of the Ozarks in Clarksville. Three of the grants were for \$5 each, one for the amazing sum of \$2.50!

Church members embarked on a beautification plan in the summer of 1909, and formed a committee to raise money to pay for the sidewalk in front of the church at 9th and "B." Session members made arrangements with the American National Bank to overdraw as much as \$100, if necessary, to pay for expenses. They also discussed a plan to increase the income for the church by going to each member and obtaining an annual subscription.

In December, the Session accepted the resignation of Brother Clift. A report was approved that indicated court records showed the church was deeded from the Cumberland Presbyterian Board of Missions to members S.F. Stahle, C.N. Geren and George Dobyms as Trustees. The Session also agreed to employ a stonecutter to formally change the letters of the church cornerstone to read "Central Presbyterian Church, USA."

During the first meeting of 1909, the Session agreed to give the Reverend Coates two weeks vacation for a "meeting in Tennessee," and also decided to put in two "water closets" for the membership.

In the spring, the Reverend Coates submitted his resignation, and once again Central began a search for a new minister. Under his aggressive first-year enthusiasm, the church had grown to a membership of 244. It was not until the fall that the Reverend R.T. Phillips of Corsicana, Texas, was called to start at once, at a salary of \$1,200 per year -- a call which he quickly accepted.

About this time same time, Fort Smith's First National Bank began work on an eight-story "skyscraper" at 6th and Garrison. A temperance revival swept through Fort Smith during the winter of 1910, and the Central Session appointed John Andrews as the church's representative to meetings of the Anti-Saloon League. The anti-drinking hysteria, which swept across the South and Midwest for several months, culminated in the hatcheting of saloons in Kansas by alcohol foe Carrie Nation in 111. Her actions stirred a national conscience that led to the establishment of Prohibition eight years later.

While Carrie was chopping bar stools, the Women's Home and Foreign Missionary Society of the Central Church in Fort Smith published its course of study for 1911. The president of the group, which had consolidated with the Ladies Aid of Central three years earlier, was Mrs. John P. Sullinger. Mrs. William Hodgens was listed as first vice-president, and Mrs. William Rebsamen as second vice-president.

The group held its business meetings on the first Tuesday of each month, and Bible study and prayer on the second Tuesday. Church visitation came each third Tuesday, with mission study the fourth, and extra church visitation on fifth Tuesdays, if necessary. The women's group studied such foreign nations as China, Africa, India, Alaska, Cuba, Japan, Korea and Persia.

In the ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF FORT SMITH, 1911 was the year that Lincoln Beachey landed a small plane in a tiny pasture at the intersection of Midland and Spradling in Fort Smith "... to pick up air mail for the short hop to the main post office at 6th and Rogers." This was reportedly the second airmail service in the United States.

The following April, Fort Smith residents scanned the newspaper headlines to learn if any friends or relatives were aboard the luxury liner Titanic, the "unsinkable" ship, that went down after striking an iceberg in the North Atlantic.

In September of 1913, another wave of prohibition swept the Fort Smith area -- perhaps on the heels of the establishment of a new "honest" commission form of city government. Central parishioners were caught up in the "anti-alcohol" fervor. On the 28th, there was a large turnout for a special meeting concerning "spiritual welfare."

Out of that meeting came a plan to establish a Central "role of member" to generate more enthusiasm for the church among members. But there was always the ever-present need for donations. By Christmas, it was agreed the Elders and Deacons would divide responsibilities for soliciting "subscriptions" from the membership.

By early 1914, local debate centered around a lawsuit by the Anti-Saloon League to shut down all the drinking establishments along Garrison Avenue. Antagonism against the "wets" in Fort Smith paralleled feelings in Washington, where serious legal opposition to wide open alcohol consumption was growing rapidly. In Fort Smith, the "drys" lost the first round, when Judge Hester ruled the saloons in the west end of town could stay open, providing they were properly licensed. About that same time, a new bank was chartered in Fort Smith -- the City National Bank.

Central members forgot about Prohibition when Dr. Phillips announced August 10th that he was leaving the church, effective in November. As is so often the case, there is no mention in the church records about the reason for his leaving. Considering past history, one could suspect it was financial. The Reverend Phillips left Central having brought in 177 new members during his five-year tenure.

Few members of Central -- or others in Fort Smith, for that matter -- were overly concerned about the assassination in late July of Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand by a Serbian nationalist. But the shockwaves rumbled through eastern Europe in the next few weeks, and nations rapidly chose up sides. Austria, Germany and Turkey formed one alliance, while France, Russia and England formed the other. The "Great War" was underway.

By September, the search was underway at Central for a new pastor to replace Dr. Phillips. The Session also formed a committee to look into the "... founding of a Mission on the east side of the city," near the area referred to in the minutes as the "belt line." The matter is not referred to again.

As 1915 arrived, war clouds in Europe grew ever darker, and the financial status at Central was not exactly bright. Session members argued about raising more money before a new pastor could be called. Approximately \$800 was available, but it was agreed that about another \$300 was badly needed. Somehow, the congregation rose to the challenge; by February 13th, the money was in hand.

The Session was interested in the Reverend J.H. Kirkpatrick, who agreed to the call by March. Joyous Session members greeted him with \$1,900 collected in the Every Member Canvas. His \$1,500 annual salary was indeed intact!

It is not known if any Fort Smith residents were among the more than 100 Americans aboard the Cunard steamship Lusitania when it was torpedoed off the Irish coast on May 8th. However, more than 1,500 passengers died in the mishap. The German attack quickly intensified a growing feeling about American involvement in the European hostilities. But it would still be nearly two years before United States troops would land in France.

Resentment of the war increased the following year, and Central continued to have financial problems. The 1916 church budget was set at \$35,000, almost half of that going to the pastor's salary. C.N. Geren was elected an Elder, and O.A. Fentress chosen as a Deacon.

In April 1917, the United States entered the war against the Kaiser, and the lives of an entire generation of Americans were changed. Draft calls went out that summer, but many Fort Smith youths began volunteering even earlier. According to the ILLUSTRATED HISTORY OF FORT SMITH, many "...caught the train east to Camp Logan Roots near Little Rock for basic training."

With the declaration of war, Americans were asked to conserve food and fuel. Central church women joined others in Fort Smith in scaling down their use of flour and meat, and doing without extras. According to the ILLUSTRATED HISTORY, "Red Cross volunteers met the troop trains passing through Fort Smith with donuts and coffee, while others gathered to roll bandages or knit socks for the boys at the front." Wage earners all over the city bought Liberty Bonds at local banks.

As if to further frustrate and demoralize the people, an influenza epidemic curled its way around the world during the early months of 1918. By summer, thousands in Arkansas were sick or already dead. Sparks and St. Edwards hospitals in Fort Smith were filled to overflowing, and many theaters and public meetings were cancelled during the spring and

summer months to minimize the spread of the deadly disease. Although a specific list of victims is unavailable, Central had more than its normal share of funerals that year.

Earl in March, a church budget of \$3,500 was proposed. About 120 members were solicited and 81 of them pledged a little over \$2,500. Nearly 40 members decided not to pledge, perhaps because of the problems brought on by war and influenza.

In the June Session meeting, the Reverend Kirkpatrick asked for and was given a four-month leave of absence to work with the War Y.M.C.A. R.B. Guthrie was called in as the supply pastor "for an indefinite period." Session members also voted to assume a \$500 indebtedness of Arkansas Cumberland College to the Burk Brick company. It was later decided to indefinitely close Fort Smith's Park Hill Mission. The mission's organ and other furniture were returned to Central and the Mission Committee was told to make arrangements for repairs to the facility.

In August, the departed Reverend Kirkpatrick wrote the church, saying that "circumstances had arisen that made it necessary for him and Central to consider the wisdom and advisability of Central securing a more permanent pastoral relationship." Two weeks later, supply pastor R.B. Guthrie resigned, and the Session accepted his resignation -- with no acceptance of the Reverend Kirkpatrick's resignation.

Later in September, the Reverend Kirkpatrick wrote Central again, asking that the "church join him in asking Presbytery to dissolve the pastoral relationship." But the motion was not approved. Yet in early October, the Session recommended that Brother W.J. Willis "... be extended the regular call of the church." The Reverend Willis declined the offer. Two weeks after the worldwide celebration of the Armistice in France, the frustrated Central Session again turned to the Reverend Kirkpatrick, asking him to withdraw his original request that his relationship with the church be terminated. By Christmas, he had withdrawn his resignation, but asked for a six-month leave to go overseas with the Y.M.C.A. group.

On January 16, 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution was ratified; one that would outlaw the sale and consumption of alcoholic beverages by 1920. Gradually saloons and drinking establishments in Fort Smith and across the country began to shut down. After years of struggling, the "drys" had won!

While Central Session members authorized negotiations for the purchase of the Phillips home on North 15th for a new parsonage, the Peace Conference to finalize terms of the "war to end all wars" got underway in Paris. Six months later the Treaty of Versailles would be drawn up but never ratified by the United States.

In late May of 1919, the Session finally accepted the resignation of Pastor J.H. Kirkpatrick, who -- during his four-year tenure that spanned some trying times -- added more than 200 members to Central's rolls. On two consecutive Sundays in June, the Reverend Harold Forde preached sermons before a crowded sanctuary. However, the Session informed him that Central was not yet ready to call a new minister.

In August, the Session instructed the Finance Committee to raise \$870 still owed the Burk Brick Company "any way they saw fit." Another \$600 was overdue on the manse remodeling on North 15th. The Pastor Search Committee concluded its work by recommending the church call the Reverend R.F. Galloway of Washington, Iowa. He quickly accepted.

Despite Central's shortage of operating funds, the Session fell in line with a growing national trend -- an attempt to soften the financial burdens of the men who went overseas during the Great War. They marked "paid" all the pledges from the "boys in the congregation who were in the service during the war." It is not noted how many pledges were forgiven.

## Chapter III - Years of Change: 1919-1928

The era of Prohibition officially began with the start of a new decade that would become known as the Roaring Twenties. It was a restless time for millions of young men, some of whom returned from the horrors of war forever changed and anxious for diversion.

Illegal alcohol continued to flow through speak-easies to a new wave of young people looking for something different. The Twenties would become an age of flagpole sitting, barnstorming, marathon dances, goldfish swallowing and unbridled "madness."

Even Fort Smith was caught up in the crazes that swept the nation. The city's churches, including Central, made attempts to curb the speeding social upheavals by staging religious revivals that pleaded a return to moral consciousness and responsibility.

But old attitudes and lifestyles were being swept out the window. Women were granted the right to vote in 1920, and they responded by shortening their hairdos and their skirts. Electricity was now pouring into Fort Smith homes, bringing with it a mysterious phenomenon called "radio." Movie theaters on Garrison played to capacity crowds, and though the screens were silent, talkies were just a few years away.

Automobiles were everywhere on Midland and Towson Avenues, and parked in front of homes all over town. Businesses called "filling stations" were replacing liveries and stables. At newer homes, garages were going up; backyard privies came down -- victims of indoor toilets and running water.

Central participated in the battle against sagging morality by appointing a committee to work with the "Fort Smith Board of Temperance and Moral Welfare" in June of 1920. The precise functions of the committee are not explained in the church records, nor is there proof they actually functioned at all. And no mention can be found of the results of the apparent citywide desire by some to improve the moral fiber of its residents.

Also during the first year of the new decade, the Session voted to raise the salary of both the janitor and the church pianist from \$10 to \$15 per month. However, pledge contributions lagged, as usual, and the Session appointed Mrs. Beulah Huff to be the "church collector."

[photo on page 24 -- cutline -- Garrison Avenue as it appeared about 1920.]

As a reward, she was to receive 20 percent of what she collected in past due pledges. There is no record as to what extent she was able to supplement her lifestyle through her collection business.

In October, the Session received a letter from Arkansas Synod Moderator Elbert Hefner, calling attention to the Synod meeting in Hot Springs. The Reverend Hefner, serving the

First Presbyterian Church in Clarksville, would later become well-known to many present-day Central members.

Republican Warren Harding was elected president in November, defeating Democrats James Cox and vice-presidential candidate Franklin Roosevelt. Not too many weeks after Harding and his running mate, Calvin Coolidge, were inaugurated in March, the Trustees of Central reported they had employed "... John Campbell (colored) as the janitor for the church."

In May, the Clerk of the Session made an interesting spelling entry that we quote: "It was moved and seconded that we higher Mr. Swank as choir leader at a salary of ten dollars per month. The motion carried." The following month, a deficit of \$21.13 was reported in the "picture machine" fund.

On November 5, the Central Sunday School was instructed to "... purchase two gas stoves, the price not to exceed \$20, for the upstairs Sunday School rooms." It was agreed the stoves would be paid for from Sunday School funds. At the same meeting, it was decided to divide the church into nine groups, each group headed by an Elder, a Deacon and a Sunday School member. Although the purpose was to "attain church goals for the year," later Session notes do not indicate what those were. Perhaps one was to clean up the church and its North 9th and "B" premises, because on January 20, 1922, Central would be the host church for the Presbytery meeting. Elder J.T. Porter represented Central.

For reasons unknown, Session members began meeting monthly in the parlor of the Hotel Main downtown. One of the first items of business at the new meeting site was the setting of a church budget for 1922 at \$5,500. It is also noted that Reverend Galloway was instructed to buy "domes of silence" for the choir chairs. (What were they? How much did they cost?) The purchases were authorized despite a Session report in March that showed church receipts of \$4,873, disbursements at \$4,917 and unpaid bills totaling \$378.

In fact, when a Mrs. Leona Miller asked about her letter of transfer to join a new church, the Central Clerk was first instructed to find out the status of her pledge. To make matters worse, Elbert Hefner, the Presbyterian Missionary and Benevolent Treasurer, had to write the Session at Central, asking for the church's first quarterly "New Era Quota" payment. The matter was referred to the church treasurer.

In May, Fort Smith's link with eastern Oklahoma was strengthened with the gala opening of the "Million Dollar Free Bridge" at the end of Garrison Avenue. The SOUTHWEST AMERICAN reported a two-day ceremony with ads proclaiming it as "... the greatest event in Fort Smith history since the Armistice was signed." Nearly 25,000 people showed up, including more than 80 former United States Marshalls still living who had served the Fort Smith area court under Judge Parker.

Louise Golden was crowned "Queen of the Bridge Opening," and the ceremony included the governors of both Arkansas and Oklahoma, ten bands and eight army planes. One night's festivities ended with a gigantic fireworks display; the other evening's events concluded with an impressive Electric Exposition on Garrison Avenue," preceded by a gala parade, which reportedly was "not to be delayed by any reason." The new free bridge -- described as "... broad, white and sturdy ... 3,168 feet of asphalt, steel and concrete into Oklahoma" -- was obviously needed. One newspaper report after the day -- Sunday -- he delivered a stirring sermon to the congregation and afterward accepted the call at a salary of \$3,000 per year.

Although the church suspended regular Sunday evening services from mid-July to mid-August because of the heat, the new Reverend Gilmore was apparently not idle. His first formal meeting with the Session came in late August, when he announced plans for a church "Rally Day" in October. At the Session meeting in September, he made some suggestions, (according to the minutes) that he said would result in, "... better and more efficient work of the church." Among his statements was a request for a typewriter, "...to be put in working order without charge."

The Reverend Gilmore initiated a "Junior Church" program. Each Sunday he would address the youngsters for several minutes before the regular sermon. After the gathering, the children were excused for the rest of the service. The Reverend Gilmore also discussed with the Session plans for a church "School of Missions" to be held one night each week for six weeks, from mid-January until the first of March. At the same meeting, the Session discussed employing Mrs. W.C. Shipley as Choir Director.

The formal installation of the Reverend Gilmore as Pastor was held on January 13, 1925. The Reverend Hefner of Clarksville was chairman of the ceremonies, which opened with a scripture reading and prayer by the Reverend W.S. Ellis, moderator to the Synod of Arkansas. The charge to Reverend Gilmore was read by the Reverend W.B. Miller of Van Buren.

One of the first items the Reverend Gilmore announced at the February Session meeting was that Central would host Presbytery in April. Elders agreed the church would have to be put in "working order." In March, the Trustees were authorized to "... have the Toilet put in proper condition." Mrs. Joe Conklin and Mrs. Aubrey Yates pointed out the "...poor janitorial service around the church." They also said the piano needed new rollers.

Notes written in 1938 by the then-Pastor Elbert Hefner revealed that Central had apparently grown rapidly in membership from its founding in 1888, for the rolls showed 244 members by 1907. However, during the pastorship of Dr. R.T. Phillips, the church showed a net loss of 19 members to only 225 in 19145. According to Dr. Hefner's notes, the church fared better under the Reverend J.H. Kirkpatrick, with a net gain of 64 members between early 1915 and May of 1919.

When the Reverend Gilmore came to Central in August of 1924, the church's membership stood at 291. With the implementation of some of his programs mentioned earlier, the church undoubtedly attracted new members in late 1924 and early 1925, and perhaps the enthusiastic pastor envisioned the need for a larger place of worship. Informal discussions and idle speculation about a new building continued into the spring. A motion by Deacon Sipe at the May 17th Session meeting carried, and S.W. Telford, C.M. Geren, O.A. Fentress, S.E. Donoghue and J.T. Ingles were named to a "Location or Site Committee" (for a new church).

In the midst of the discussions about a new building, Elder and Session Clerk Telford and his wife met with Pastor Gilmore -- perhaps informally -- to discuss ways of beautifying the church. One of the ideas mentioned was to add flowers -- more specifically roses. It was too late in the spring for area roses to be blooming, so they ordered several dozen from a Kansas City florist and placed them around the sanctuary on a Sunday in early June.

The result was breathtaking! Congregation members and visitors enjoyed the floral beauty so much, it was quickly decided to display the roses again the following year. But the date was moved to early May so Fort Smith grown roses could be used. Little did the Telfords know they had started a tradition that would endure in the church for more than 30 years.

The Central Rose Festival continued to grow in stature each year, and soon attracted attention not only in Fort Smith, but the entire area as well. Each first or second Sunday in May, record numbers of church-goers crowded into the sanctuary at North 9th and "B" to see the dazzling chancel display of roses -- the beauty of God's work.

For more than a quarter century the organization of the Rose Festival was the work of the Business Women's Circle of the church. In later years, the planning and arrangements were taken over by members of Dr. Means' Bible Class. In her HISTORY OF CENTRAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH in 1978, Marion Stephens writes of the Rose Festival:

Literally truckloads of roses, especially Paul's Scarlet, were often used in the decorations. Every person attended the Festival was pinned with a rose as he entered the sanctuary. More than once when Fort Chaffee was in full operation, the Rose Festival was taken to the soldiers for their enjoyment and inspiration. The program of worship for the Rose Festival varied from year to year. The ministers who served the church during the years of the Festival addressed their meditation remarks to the beauties of the rose and other wonders of nature.

In 1937, the story of Central's successful Rose Festival was presented to the American Rose Society in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. A photograph and article about the annual services soon appeared in Society's monthly magazine. Inquiries about holding similar services began arriving at Central from as far away as Portland, Oregon. The city of Anadarko, Oklahoma, put on a rose Festival as an annual community affair, changing the church from year to year.

According to notes compiled from Central's Festival of 1940 (at which 407 persons attended), the unnamed author writes, "The president of the National Rose Society was in Fort Smith during the past winter. His attention was called to this Festival. He was very much interested but said he knew of nothing like it in any other Church."

Further notes compiled in 1953 posed the question about the endurance of the Festival's popularity for almost 30 years. It was answered this way:

I believe there are at least three reasons for the popularity of the Rose Festival. (1) The love of roses is not a passing fancy, but a real and continuing appreciation, something that is present to a greater or lesser extent in many people. (2) The appeal of beauty is closely akin to the spiritual, in fact, it is an experience of worship. All these aesthetic sensations and ideas stimulate the thoughtful person to grateful appreciation to the God of Life and beauty, peace and harmony, such is seen and felt in the presence of roses. It is an inspiration just to sit in a church filled with roses.

About a month after the first Rose Festival at Central, "religion" rocketed to the front pages of the nation's newspapers, with the opening of the Scopes "Monkey Trial" in Dayton, Tennessee. Renowned attorney Clarence Darrow defended a rural school teacher accused of teaching the theory of "evolution" to his students. Defending the Bible's "creation" theory was the Nebraska orator and former Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan. The lengthy trial focused on the direct clash between two opposing theological points that is still being debated today.

Meanwhile, debate continued among Central members in 1925 about the future of a new church. In his "Notes on the 70th Anniversary of Central" (held in 1958), Pastor Emeritus Hefner recalled how enthusiasm kept growing: "The history of a church is a thrilling study ... but not always according to schedule. Such delays appeared in the story of this church, where the vision of a new building waited thirty years before the new church appeared."

Pastor Hefner's notes continued:

My interest in this story began at a meeting of the Synod of Arkansas at Brinkley in October of 1925, when the Fort Smith Pastor (Reverend Gilmore) announced, with a good deal of enthusiasm, that he had just received a phone call from a special committee in his church back home that they had agreed to buy the lots upon which the City National Bank now stands for the sum of \$18,000, and they expected to build a \$100,000 church.

In November, the congregation voiced its approval, and authorized the purchase of "Lots 4, 5 and 6 of Block K in the Fitzgerald addition" (at about 12th and Rogers). At the next Session meeting, Elder Fentress, saying the work of his selection committee was finished, asked that his group be discharged. But a consensus among the Ruling Elders indicated just the opposite -- the work of his committee had just begun. So the committee "to push

for a new church" was authorized to launch a plan to raise \$18,000 to pay for the three lots.

Just before Christmas of 1925, the Site Committee reported \$9,000 had already been pledged, but needed the other half to complete the purchase. The Session engineered a three-tiered bank loan -- \$3,000 to be repaid within thirty days, another \$3,000 to be repaid within ninety days, and a final \$3,000 to be repaid within six months. The interest rate on the loan was 6-1/2 percent.

In January, the congregation selected a Building Committee composed of ten men and five women that would oversee the details of erecting the church on Rogers Avenue. Yet financial collections lagged. In March, the Site Committee reported only \$1,000 had been repaid on the first loan, and the second note would come due in April. An "every member canvass" failed to produce additional revenue.

Membership at Central continued to slowly increase. Among the new members in early 1926 was Collier Porter, who has remained active to the present day. The Reverend Gilmore was authorized to negotiate the services of the Reverend Ransopher of Brinkley, Arkansas, as assistant pastor. At the same time, the Session voted to recommend to a congregational meeting that the official Board be increased to 15 Elders and 15 Deacons.

The Reverend Ransopher was not hired, and in June, Pastor Gilmore said he had found a woman with necessary qualifications. Session members were understandably taken aback, because they had specifically asked him to find a man for the job. After a lengthy and intense discussion, the Session reluctantly voted to give a woman the same considerations, "... provided she was otherwise fitted for the work."

In early July of 1926, the Session met with Miss Smith (she was never referred to otherwise in the Session notes) and they agreed to hire her for a probationary period of six months, at a salary of \$2,200 per year. It was agreed that within the first four months of her services as assistant pastor, the Session would advise her "whether or not we would continue her services for the next 12 months."

The hiring of Miss Smith was approved at the same Session meeting that Elder Fentress said that two of the \$3,000 notes for the Rogers property were now past due. The unnamed bank wanted a guarantee the loans would be repaid, and after debate, the Session members voted to sign the papers; efforts for a new church were slowly fading.

Five months later the Session -- despite problems in paying off the notes -- voted to hire a church secretary at \$50 per month. They also decided to sponsor a Boy Scout Troop. In December of 1926, a choir director was added to the Central payroll at \$40 per month. And, just before Christmas, a new Sunday school class, taught by Dr. C.S. Means, was organized primarily for young married couples. Dr. Means taught the class for many years, and a weekly Sunday Bible class at the church is now named in his honor.

Financial matters came to a head in March, when the Reverend Gilmore urged immediate attention be given to the "benevolence Budget." After lengthy debate, members urged the treasurer to "send all money on hand to apply to the budget." Two months later, Central listed a treasury balance of \$5.56. Outstanding bills totaled more than \$150.

Financial matters were quickly forgotten in late March of 1927 when the Arkansas River began to rise. Heavy winter snows and early spring rains across the mountains and plains combined to produce incredible torrents of water that began rushing toward the Gulf of Mexico.

As Fort Smith residents read of record floods moving down the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers, the Arkansas continued to push to record levels upstream at Wichita and Tulsa. It was apparent the city was in for some serious flooding.

Lacking the restraints of today's lock and reservoir storage capacities, the Arkansas swelled to a crest of 36.7 feet on April 16th at Fort Smith. As the water rose, the five-year-old Garrison bridge was closed to auto traffic, and coal cars were used to weigh down the Gould railroad bridge. Muddy flood waters surged into the city's factory district, shutting down many plants and putting hundreds of employed temporarily out of work. Many of the workers filled sandbags and fought to keep the water from advancing further into the Fort Smith business district.

[Photo on page 32 -- cutline -- Downtown Fort Smith side street, under water during the record-breaking flood of 1927. (Courtesy Old Fort Museum)]

The high water forced about 500 persons in the city from their homes, and the **SOUTHWEST TIMES RECORD** reported that "bedding, beds, mattresses and springs were badly needed for flood sufferers housed at the horse and mule market at 1014 Carnall." About 70 persons were taken care of at the Welfare Building. Most churches, including Central, donated space, supplies and manpower in the fight to keep the river in its banks.

Red Cross officials in Fort Smith and across the central part of the country called it "the greatest flood in the Arkansas river valley ever recorded. The valley is inundated for hundreds of miles, many farm houses have been wrecked and carried away by the flood, crops have been destroyed and in many cases, live stock has been lost."

Bitter memories of the flood cleanup were brightened with exciting news from France on May 22nd. "Lucky Lindy" had made it! Charles Lindbergh had become the first flyer in history to soar solo across the Atlantic, landing in Paris amid a crowd of cheering supporters who stormed his plane to get a look at the young aviator. In the days that followed, Fort Smith residents cheered with those across the nation at Lindbergh's accomplishment. But few probably realized the significance of the 33-hour flight of the "Spirit of St. Louis" as the dawning of a new age in aeronautics.

As the summer dragged on, so did support to build a new Central Presbyterian Church. In July of 1927, the Ruling Elders approved a motion to send monthly statements to those members "subscribing to the budget." The statements would be followed by letters urging payment. But that decision was amended to read, "to send statements only to those in arrears." At the same meeting -- perhaps in an effort to save money -- the Elders voted to abolish the position of Church Secretary, effective August 1st. Hopes for a new building were beginning to fade, and it became difficult for the Reverend Gilmore to hide his disappointment.

On the night of September 25, 1927, the dream of a new church on Rogers officially died. The Session approved a motion to "rebuild the Church at its present location." A local architect, identified as a Mr. Henderson, was present at another church meeting a week later, to "answer questions from the Building Committee concerning sketches of remodeling plans submitted, along with an estimate of the cost."

The Friday before Mr. Henderson met with the Session, the baseball pennant races reached a historic climax when 31-year-old George Ruth -- known to the sports world as "Babe" -- smacked his 60th home run of the year, breaking his own record of 59 set in 1921. Baseball fans in Fort Smith and the rest of the country had followed his accomplishments, and his New York Yankee team known as "Murder's Row" went on to demolish the Pittsburgh Pirates in four straight games in the World Series.

By January of 1928, the financial crisis at Central had reached epidemic proportions. The balance of the "building fund" due the bank was just short of \$5,000. But the books showed only \$56 on hand. A discouraged Pastor Gilmore then asked the congregation to join with him in requesting that the Presbytery dissolve the relationship on January 31, 1928. His motion was approved.

## Chapter IV – The Hefner Era: 1928-1940

One man who had for several years watched the new building efforts at Central from not too far away was Dr. Elbert Hefner, who in early 1928 was beginning his tenth year as Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Clarksville, Arkansas. The Reverend Hefner was no stranger to the Central membership, because since 1923, he had been Clerk of the Arkansas Synod, which had offices at 917 Grand in Fort Smith.

The 50-year-old Missouri native made frequent trips to Fort Smith. In October of 1926, he had been invited to conduct a week's preaching mission at the downtown church, and made many friends in the congregation. Most of the members were impressed with the Reverend's intense dedication to his chosen profession to serve God.

It was therefore not surprising that just three days after the Reverend Gilmore asked to be relieved of his duties as Pastor, a meeting was held to discuss the report that Dr. Hefner had been "found" and accepted the job within a week -- perhaps the shortest search time for a pastor in Central's church history.

In fact, the "passing of the pulpit" came so swiftly the Reverend Walter Gilmore had barely packed his bags for his new church -- the Court Avenue Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee.

Dr. Hefner was formally installed in the Central pulpit on March 11, 1928. No one in the congregation that Sunday realized that he would remain the Central Pastor through the Great Depression and on into World War II -- the longest tenure of all the ministers ever called to the Fort Smith church.

There are many in the congregation today who remember Dr. Hefner well, among them -- of course -- is his own daughter, Maudress Overstreet.

In notes for speech in 1948 commemorating the 60th anniversary of the Church, one of Dr. Hefner's reflections centered around the formation of a 1928 Bible Class:

*During the Sunday School hour on March 4th, twelve men got together and arranged to invite the men of the church and friends from the community to meet the next Sunday morning in the Fentress Mortuary Chapel at North 8th and "A," for the purpose of organizing a men's Bible class. Fifty-three men appeared the next Sunday and the Men's Fellowship Bible Class of the Central Presbyterian Church was organized, with R.K. Rogers as President. Those fellows, men of many churches, and of no church, Jews and gentiles, meant business. The spirit was warm and most cordial. This was something new and different in Fort Smith, and the men liked it. New names were added every Sunday.*

According to Dr. Hefner's notes, the Bible class soon outgrew the chapel and began meeting at the Masonic Temple about two blocks east. At one time in May, 1931, the

roster contained 206 names! "Everyone was excited!" related the Pastor. "It called attention to the little old church downtown in a very favorable manner, and so gave it citywide standing such as it had not known before. It also boosted the hope and the courage of the church, enabling it to carry on through a very difficult period."

Meanwhile, in Fort Smith, support was growing for the establishment of a junior college. Less than six months later, the first classes began in the basement of the Fort Smith High School at 14th and Grand (now Darby Junior High). When the impressive new high school opened a few months later at 22nd and "B" streets, the instructors and students at the fledgling Fort Smith Junior College also moved into the new building.

Perhaps in an effort to build on the optimism generated by Dr. Hefner, Session members voted in March 1928 to reorganize the governing board, making all Deacons and Elders, at that time, Elders of equal standing. The number of board members would be 21, each serving a three-year term, with seven Elders rotating off the Session each year. One of the three church Trustees would be replaced each year.

The church still struggled financially. By November, the treasurer's report showed a shortage of \$283. In February of 1929, the "men of the church" met to consider a plan to clear Central of its debts. The Treasurer reported \$2,700 was needed. According to the Session notes, \$2,200 was subscribed and \$159.75 was raised in cash.

[Photo on page 37 -- cutline -- Men's Bible Class at Central, about 1929.]

In March, the revised Session adopted a budget of \$7,500 and Benevolences were set at \$600, to be paid at the rate of \$50 per month. At a special meeting a month later, Dr. C.S. Means read a letter he had sent to all members who had subscribed to the budget, asking them to raise their pledge. He urged Session members to call on the families personally, in an effort to "help meet the budget," which was still short by \$600.

Session notes indicated in May "... the 1929 budget, after much hard work -- was slightly over-subscribed."

Despite the recurring financial crises, church functions continued normally in the waning year of the decade known as "The Roaring Twenties." Jeff Montgomery served as the first Scoutmaster of the newly established Boy Scout Troop. In May, a special music fund yielded \$10.50 to Mrs. Harrington and Mrs. Geren, who were coordinating the piano and choir for a four-day "evangelistic meeting" at the church.

In July, at the urging of Dr. Hefner, a special meeting was called to discuss needed repairs to the Church that would make it "... suitable for the next few years." Mrs. O.A. Fentress, J.M. Geren and Mrs. R.B. Hudson were named to a "Committee of Three" to take charge of the repairs. Another "Committee of Five," consisting of R.K. Rodgers, Mrs. Dove Yates, Oscar Fentress, Mrs. Ella Levitt and Mrs. R.A. Williams, was named to handle the finances. Cost of the repairs was not to exceed \$1,000.

By mid-September of 1929, the modest renovations had been completed. Since the roof repairs cost only \$345, the total bill for the project was only \$920. Earlier estimates had allocated \$50 for new doors and windows, with painting and redecorating to cost \$450.

In early October, Dr. Hefner outlined a new "Five Point Program" for Central, which apparently included a goal of 50 new members by January 1, 1930. It was also agreed to pay the architect \$400 for sketches of the proposed new church at 12th and Rogers that was sadly being postponed. Few at that meeting envisioned that the dream of a new Central would be pushed back almost a quarter-century.

Perhaps some members of the Fort Smith financial fraternity had been concerned before the last week in October, when selling activity on Wall Street began to accelerate rapidly. Stock prices that had climbed steadily during the past year wavered on October 24th and 25th, but a pleasant fall weekend forestalled any further stock activity.

On Monday, October 28th, the selling resumed, but at a much more rapid pace than before. Insiders knew the economy was collapsing, and on Tuesday, panic reigned on Wall Street. Millions of shares were hastily put up for sale; there were few buyers and values tumbled like a house of cards. The Great Depression had begun. Some people would feel its direct effects for almost a decade, and the forced changes in life-style would influence an entire generation of Americans.

It took several months for the rest of the country to feel the affects. Early in 1930, Central members adopted a church budget of \$8,000, with \$3,600 going to Pastor Hefner's salary. A second budget of \$4,750 was proposed to cover the church lots on Rogers, but no action was taken on the matter. Session members did agree to change the church calendar to conform to a yearly one starting in January.

The Church budget was certified in March by the Moderator of the Fort Smith Presbytery -- F.M. Wylie -- who had served as Central's minister in the 1980's when it was still the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. (No other information about the Reverend Wylie was ever discovered in the preparation of this book.)

Session members met the night of June 6, 1930, and learned Central had outstanding bills totaling more than \$550. Among the Elders attending was C.N. Geren, who was told only minutes after the meeting that his 25-year-old son, Charles, had been killed in a car accident north of Mena. Funeral services were conducted by Dr. Hefner in the Geren home on South 13th the following Monday.

Sorrow over the loss of a future Fort Smith leader seemed to match the deepening mood of the entire country. The "ripple effect" of the market crash was reaching into the smaller cities and towns and the nation's farmlands. Workers were being laid off, pay cuts were frequent, and unemployment was on the rise.

Searching for ways to reduce the Central budget, Session members in July decided to suspend all Music Department salaries for the month of August. They also canceled the

Church's janitorial service. Trash would be collected each week by a different two-man team of church volunteers.

Despite the deepening economic gloom during the summer of 1930, exciting things were happening on a 320-acre tract deep in the Ouachita Mountains on Highway 28 southeast of Waldron. Construction was underway on a "boomtown" called Forrester, that promised to provide both housing and jobs for hundreds of workers for the Caddo River Lumber Co.

A full-page announcement in the SOUTHWEST AMERICAN promised nearly 100 homes finished by fall, and each one would have a garage! Streets had been laid out, a business section was planned, a 42-room hotel was under construction, and a population of more than 1,000 was predicted by 1931 or 1932.

However, like so many Depression dreams, Forrester flourished only briefly, and the little community faded into obscurity before the end of World War II. This ghost town is not even shown on present-day Arkansas maps.

There was one bright spot in the summer of 1930. In July, the city's first radio station -- KFPW -- went on the air, broadcasting on 1340 kilocycles with 50 watts of power. The permit for the station had been transferred from Siloam Springs. New owner, John England, manager of the Goldman Hotel, built the studios for the new station on the hotel's top floor.

In his book, ARKANSAS AIRWAVES, Ray Poindexter writes, "The first test program (on KFPW) came at 1 a.m. July 16th, and featured three hours of phonograph music. Response came from Illinois, Wisconsin and Oklahoma." Station manager Jimmy Barry wasted no time in endearing KFPW to area listeners. Although the station broadcasted a limited schedule at first, it helped the Rotary Club solicit new members and sponsored a dance program to sell high school (Northside) football tickets. In September, listeners enjoyed World Series action -- static free -- between the St. Louis Cardinals and Philadelphia Athletics.

Listeners also heard the St. Cecelia Music Club of Paris, the first area group to perform on radio; soon local churches were offering daily programming. Maudress Overstreet recalls that central was one of several churches responsible for a 7 a.m. devotional program six days per week. "Each week the responsibility would rotate to a different church, so we had several each year. The pastor, a few members of the choir, and our pianist would rise early and be ready to begin the 15-minute program at the studio. There were reports many people tuned in regularly."

Early in September, a thousand Arkansas legionnaires descended on Fort Smith, filling up the Goldman and the recently opened Ward Hotel. The delegates came to conduct some business and have a good time. After a huge parade down Garrison, before an estimated 15,000 people, the Legionnaires called their Fort Smith meeting "the best state

convention ever." But during the wee hours of Legion revelry, with conventioners traversing downtown Fort Smith streets, something apparently got a little bit out of hand.

At the meeting three days later, on September 5th, the Central Session decided to join five other local churches in denouncing the actions of citizens and law enforcement officers during the American Legion Convention. The statement read as follows:

*Churches regret it should be necessary for their organization to criticize anything of a community nature, but when our youth, our women, our friends and visitors are unprotected from the presence of drunkenness and vice; when life and property are endangered by intoxicated drivers; when men struggling against the power of vicious habits are overcome, the people who believe in principles cannot keep silent, lest they, too, should be thought to approve or feel that the city and federal authorities are helpless, when neither of these is true. Therefore we deeply deplore the attitude of both officers and citizens toward law and order as it was expressed in this community during the entertainment of the American Legion Convention.*

It is not known which Fort Smith church initiated the statement, nor precisely what incidents took place after the parade, but the proposal was signed equally by the congregations of First Presbyterian, First Baptist, Grand Avenue Methodist-Episcopal, Midland Heights Methodist and Calvary Baptist churches. (A scanning of SOUTHWEST AMERICAN files during the period revealed no mention of any public response to the statement.)

In October, Session members decided to change their meeting day from Friday to Monday, and a month later decided to hire someone who could double as Church Secretary and Assistant Pastor. The salary for the double-job was pegged at \$1,500 per year. Despite the gradually deepening Depression, the Session set a goal of 120 new members for 1931.

At the start of the new year, it was estimated about 1,600 people in Fort Smith were unemployed. Many of the more destitute families had moved into squalid shacks sprouting on a narrow strip of land between the railroad tracks and Arkansas River's junction with the Poteau. As the Depression years passed, the number of families living in what came to be known as "Coke Hill" would grow to several hundred. (The area remained a Fort Smith eyesore until the shacks were leveled in the late 1950s to make room for the Belle Point Park overlooking the river.)

In January of 1931, though, the Session conducted the following business concerning their search for a secretary-assistant pastor. Much to the chagrin of a determined woman, "A motion was made and passed that the Clerk of Session be instructed to write Mrs. Griffin a letter, in answer to her letters, explaining to her that the plan the Session has in mind in securing a pastor's assistant and secretary, is for a man." It seems everyone was looking for ways to make a dollar, or at least a quarter. A man identified only as "Mr. Kaylor" went before the Session in February, wanting to lease the church lots at 12th and

Rogers, in order to open a "filling station and tourist court." It was decided later an agreement between Central and Mr. Kaylor would be drawn up, subject to full Session approval. On that same date, the Session Clerk indicated the Board of National Missions had sent the Church a letter offering an extension on the manse loan.

Throughout early 1931, the unemployment rate in Fort Smith continued to rise, and Central offerings continued to fall. At a late summer Session meeting, Finance Chairman R.K. Rodgers announced that July salaries for all church employees still had not been paid. It was hoped a collection of "past dues" could solve the financial crunch. In a sudden and unselfish move, Dr. Hefner told the Session he would return \$50 of his own salary per month back to the Church Treasury, to help pay outstanding bills. The Ruling Elders graciously declined his offer, and it was assumed the matter was forgiven. However, in a letter dated September 16th, Dr. Hefner again offered to turn back \$50 per month of his salary: "This is done of my own free will and accord and without the slightest suggestion from any member of the congregation. Others have suffered reductions and I am willing to share with them and with you the inconvenience of these adjustments ... I have written this all out for your understanding and reference. The financial Secretary and Treasurer should both know the facts. Sincerely." It is not indicated in Session notes if the Elders took him up on the second offer.

Perhaps as a means of boosting morale among dispirited members of the Congregation, a meeting was held in late September to discuss the formation of a Men's Club. The idea was enthusiastically accepted. Dr. C.S. Means was chosen as president, and J.M. Geren as secretary. It was announced two weeks alter that Arkansas Congressman Ragon would address the new club on October 18th.

As 1932 dawned, bread lines were almost everywhere. Central members reached deep into their threadbare pockets, working with members of other churches in the city to help those even less fortunate than themselves.

Nationwide gloom turned to horror in early March when newspaper headlines and radio broadcasts told of the search for 19-month-old Charles Lindbergh, Junior, the son of the famed aviator. The little boy was abducted from a second floor bedroom of the family home in New Jersey. Hopes for a happy ending were dashed when the tot's body was found two months later a short distance away. Two years later, Bruno Hauptman, a former illegal alien, was arrested and then convicted of kidnapping after an intense investigation and sensational trial. Hauptman, protesting his innocence to the end, was executed on April 3, 1936.

By June, everyone was trying to cut costs -- even churches. Dr. Hefner told Session members that First Presbyterian Church had appointed a committee to explore the possibilities of a merger with Central during the summer months. Ruling Elders of the church on North 9th agreed to appoint a similar committee and study the matter. But the Central Session turned down the offer after representatives from First had recommended that all five Sunday services be held in their sanctuary.

In late August, the Session recommended that Dr. Hefner discontinue his work as teacher of the Men's Bible Class, in order to "devote himself more definitely and effectively to the Sunday School and public services of the church." It is not recorded whether he abided by the suggestion.

Month after month, the Depression dragged on. President Hoover was traveling the country by train, asking voters for another term to "make things right." But most people were listening to 50-year-old Franklin Roosevelt, a former Democratic governor of New York, who was promising the nation a "New Deal" to end the Depression. In November, Roosevelt won the White House prize, sweeping into office by more than 7,000,000 votes. Despite the Democrats' success, the nation began 1933 further behind than it was the year before.

That same year, the budget for Central Presbyterian Church was set at \$6,250, with only \$2,70 earmarked for overworked Dr. Hefner. Total church indebtedness stood at almost \$7,500. In February, Session members agreed to cooperate fully with a religious census conducted by several Fort Smith churches. Elders also discussed a letter from a "Miss Simms" seeking employment as assistant to the Pastor, or "other church work with the members." After several comments about the help she could provide the Church, it was agreed she would be hired.

Two weeks later, a naturalized Italian bricklayer, Giuseppe Zangara, fired shots at Roosevelt as a reception in Miami. Two bullets struck Chicago Mayor Anton Cermak, who died in a Florida hospital the very day.

Shortly after this incident, in an unrelated decision, the Federal Government declared a federal holiday for the nation's struggling banks. This plan was implemented to shore up the currency rate and stop "runs" on the banks by frustrated customers afraid their meager savings would be lost.

In May of 1933, a group of Fort Smith businessmen got together and decided to hold a rodeo. This local event won great support from area residents as they flocked to the rodeo shows and attempted, for a brief time, to forget banking problems and Depression worries. Also in May, Session notes indicated that the mysterious "Miss Simms" was to be retained in her unspecified job. But in August, Finance Committee Chairman R.B. Hudson recommended that "the services of Miss Simms be discontinued." No reason was given, but perhaps it was economic, for church collections continued to lag far behind the more optimistic budget predictions at the start of the year.

During October, the Session held two important meetings. On Friday the 13th, Dr. Hefner told the Elders the Church had to do something "to help the needy of the congregation through the winter months." It was agreed to establish a "Friendly Service Fund," with special offering envelopes placed in church pews for members to help others. Session members also discussed how to handle the increasing church membership. Two weeks later, Dr. Hefner submitted to the Elders an "Order of Procedure," and left the room so discussion could begin. Read by Acting Moderator O.A. Fentress, the Order dealt with a

proposed addition to the church. According to Dr. Hefner's suggestions, a Finance Committee and a Building Committee would oversee the expansion. His plan was to knock out the east end of the building and move the pulpit about twenty feet, level the sanctuary floor, install new pews and stained glass windows, and convert it to a "beautiful chapel." Sunday School rooms, a kitchen and a much-enlarged dining room were planned for the renovated basement. Other improvements were scheduled for the choir loft, and plans were announced to purchase an organ. Session members gasped, but all agreed it was something that needed to be done. And it was -- through the faith and determination of all those involved!

In December 1933, the Session invited Dr. A.B. Keeler from the Board of National Missions to visit, in the hopes of obtaining a loan. Dr. Hefner recalled, "He approved the plan and said to the two women on the committee (Mrs. Fentress and Mrs. Conklin), 'If you girls think the women would like to put in an organ, I'll add a thousand dollars to the loan for the first down payment. With that encouragement, we were determined to undertake the project.'"

But the tiny church at North 9th and "B" still owed \$5,000 to the bank for the unused lots at 12th and Rogers, and interest money was removed from the meager offerings four times a year. Interested buyers made inquiries about the lots, but Depression conditions made the sale virtually impossible. Depression prices were actually a bargain in 1934. The problem was that few people had enough ready cash to buy anything. Most of the people bowed their heads and prayed for better times. However, there was a small handful who opted for instant wealth -- and broke the laws in the process.

On May 23rd, Fort Smith residents and those in other nearby cities, breathed a collective sigh of relief and sorrow, when they learned that 29-year-old Clyde Barrow and his 23-year-old companion, Bonnie Parker, had been gunned down by authorities in Louisiana. The pair, along with Barrow's brother Marvin and the rest of the "gang," had been robbing banks and killing people with reckless abandon from Iowa to the Gulf of Mexico. And there were others whose acts were almost the same. Charles "Pretty Boy" Floyd was born in nearby Sallisaw and periodically returned to eastern Oklahoma to visit his mother. He also had numerous liaisons with his wife, who lived in Fort Smith. Floyd was shot to death in Ohio in 1934. Outlaw "Ma Barker" and her sons made headlines in gun battles with Midwestern law officers. Perhaps the most notorious of the violent criminals was John Dillinger, proclaimed by the FBI as "Public Enemy Number One." The cagey bandit was reportedly involved in numerous bank stickups -- some hundreds of miles apart and often on the same day. His career ended abruptly on the night of July 22nd, when he was gunned down outside a Chicago theater. With Dillinger's death, the "gangster era" began to fade. While the exploits of these criminals made interesting reading, they did nothing to solve Depression problems.

It seemed in the mid-30s as if even the weather was doing its best to make life more miserable, as a large area of the nation's mid-section suffered through below normal rainfall for five or six years in a row. The dry fields across much of the Central Plains turned to dust which occasionally blew in great black clouds from Colorado to Arkansas.

One report told of silt six inches deep in Garrison Avenue doorways after a dust storm. The "Dust Bowl" dealt a terrible blow to the nation's farmers and set the pattern for the migration of thousands of "Arkies" and "Okies" to the green valleys of California. Temperatures, too, ran the gamut during the Depression years. In 1934, and again in 1936, bitterly cold winters were followed by sizzling summers. Fort Smith recorded its warmest month ever in 1934, and on August 13, 1936, the mercury reached an official 113 degrees, the hottest day the city has ever recorded!

By spring of 1934, Central Presbyterian Church was financially in the proverbial "hot water." Work was set to begin on the much-needed addition, but everyone knew there was really no money to pay off the loan. Times were bleak, as Dr. Hefner recalled in his notes:

*We were urged to pray for the immediate sale of the lots (at 12th and Rogers). And the Lord heard and acted, on the very day we began work on the old building, May 14, 1934! Before the men had left, T.A. Porter came in with an offer of \$7,000 for the lots. The sale was completed at once and the debt was paid, credit restored, and we had \$2,000 for building operations. Furthermore, the spirits of our people were lifted. It was wonderful to see and feel the change.*

Dr. Hefner recalled that about 150 families benefited from work on the church expansion which continued through the hot summer. The finished project cost \$2,000 and the beautifully remodeled building was open for services September 16, 1934. In her notes, Maudress Overstreet remembered: "... The placing of the pulpit and choir loft in east end ... leveling the floor ... the added room in the basement, the walls around the pulpit, behind the communion table and choir loft were all paneled. The new pews were arranged on either side of a center aisle." On that anniversary night in 1948, Dr. Hefner added, "God has answered our faith and prayers for the people, and we set to work (in 1934) with a will to build up the congregation on the basis of the power of the Gospel to save and sustain men in the struggle for a better life."

About five hours after the dedication services on September 16th, the first wedding was held in the new sanctuary. A church member, Miss Pauline Geren and Clarence Charles Hoel, were wed in services performed by Dr. Hefner. The SOUTHWEST AMERICAN reported, "Mr. and Mrs. A.J. Geren, the parents of the bride, are among the most prominent and active workers in the church ... silver baskets filled with tube roses were placed on either side of the altar."

Despite the enlarged sanctuary, all was still not financially prosperous at Central. Much of the \$20,000 spent on the remodeling project had not been repaid, and the only way to obtain more money was through additional bank loans. As early as July -- when construction was only partially complete -- treasurer J.W. Price was authorized to arrange a \$4,000 loan from Merchants National Bank. One week after the new church was open, a financial report still showed unpaid bills totaling \$3,000. In late October, a projected \$7,000 loan fell through. But another loan, for \$3,000 was secured from the First

National Bank in November of 1934. Central's immediate financial crisis appeared to have passed.

Seemingly coincidental with the securing of long-term loans, the Depression itself was showing signs of "bottoming out," and in some parts of the country the economy was picking up. Many of President Roosevelt's radical programs were starting to work. Thousands of men in Civilian Construction Camps (CCC) -- authorized under the Works Project Administration (WPA) -- were building highways, bridges and public facilities all across America. The year 1935 looked promising.

On April 3rd, the Congregation chose 14 new Elders from a slate of 16 submitted by the Nominating Committee. Members also approved a resolution that meant future Elders could not succeed themselves for three years additional service, as had happened in the past. What the congregation did not vote on that day was the chance to select the first woman Elder at Central, but only because most of the members were not aware the subject had come up during the Session meeting four days earlier. Session Clerk S.W. Telford's entries on that day read as follows: "The Nominating Committee also suggested the name of one lady of the church, but after some discussion, a motion that it be the consensus of this body that women not be elected on this Board at the present time was unanimously adopted."

[Picture on page 47 -- cutline -- Remodeled sanctuary of original Central Presbyterian Church at North 9th and "B," about 1935.]

Perhaps to further underscore the position of women in a Presbyterian Church in 1935, the Central Session on May 10th adopted the following resolution "... after some discussion in reference to the use of our church building, a motion that the Women's Society be permitted to use the building at any time that they may decide by majority vote, when it does not interfere with other programs of the church."

On a hot, mid-August day in 1935, the world received stunning news. A plane crash in northern Alaska claimed the lives of humorist Will Rogers and veteran pilot Wiley Post. The 56-year-old Rogers -- a native of Oklahoma -- had teased and entertained world leaders and the masses with his legendary barbs. He had drawn a huge crowd of Fort Smith followers a few years earlier when he performed benefits at the Temple Theater and Fort Smith High School.

As the year drew to a close, normality was returning in much of the country. Financially, however, things had not changed that much at Central Presbyterian. Pledges from 172 members for 1936 totaled just under \$6,000, but the Church still owed nearly \$12,000 on outstanding loans. Elder Aubrey Yates told the Board he would choose ten men to "put on special work of keeping finances up to date in the congregation." But, in order to keep the new church organ operating smoothly, the Session did authorize the Music Committee to spend \$50 with the Reuter Organ Company and to pay for two service calls per year.

On January 20, 1936, King George V, the 70-year-old English monarch, died suddenly and was succeeded on the throne by his eldest son, 42-year-old Edward VIII. While the changing of the crown was barely noticed in the United States, the young Edward would make world headlines later in the year as his name became linked with the twice-divorced American socialite, Mrs. Wallis Warfield Simpson of Baltimore. By November, their relationship was discussed both quietly and openly on both sides of the Atlantic. On December 11th, Edward made a decision with his heart and his speech made new headlines, as he renounced the throne, took his family name as the Duke of Windsor, and sailed into exile to rendezvous with the woman he would eventually marry.

As Central members watched the global Cinderella story unfold, they also continued to closely watch their household budgets. So on March 12th, the Session approved Treasurer Joseph Price's plan for another \$5,000 loan with Merchants National Bank. He was further instructed to "... sign such renewal notes from time to time as may be necessary, and to apply all money received from Church Building Fund pledges on said loan, until said loan is paid in full.

One of Central's busiest Elders was involved in a project during early 1936 that launched what is now a Fort Smith tradition. R.K. Rodgers was named chairman of a group of local businessmen who organized a Rodeo and Livestock Show. As Rodgers recounted in his own 1975 autobiography, "Bert Harper was Arena Director. Board members were Frank Youmans, president of Arkansas Valley Trust -- Al Henderson, Dr. Pepper Company -- John England, Goldman Hotel -- Harry Robinson, manager Southwest American -- Lewis Cohn, Fort Smith Office Supply. We had Collier Wenderoth head up the Arkansas Livestock Show, he did a splendid job." Rodgers recalled the first two Livestock Shows were held at the Mule Barn in his stockyards across the river in Moffett, the next three at Andrews Field with the Rodeo. "We always made money with the Rodeo and spent money on the Livestock Show." (Today, of course, the Rodeo is part of the "Old Fort Days" in Harper Stadium in a park that is named in Rodgers' honor.)

Fort Smith hosted another event in mid-1936 that briefly captured the attention of the nation. Twin girls Rose and Marie Owens were born at Sparks Hospital, the first twins so named because of a nationwide publicity stunt for the movie "Rose Marie." Because the Fort Smith girls arrived first, the World Premier of the Rudolph Friml musical was held at the now non-existent Joie Theater in downtown Fort Smith.

More important events, though, were creeping into the headlines and news broadcasts during the heat of 1936. Adolph Hitler, the young and fiery Fuehrer of Germany, had been consolidated his gains and was moving troops into the demilitarized Rhineland zone. To the west, Spanish insurgents staged an uprising that led to a takeover by General Francisco Franco and the beginning of a civil war that would last several years.

The financial problems at Central seemed never to go away. In September, the Session authorized Treasurer Price to obtain another loan, at "reduced rates," from the Wortz Estate. A note from the Church was given to Mrs. Lizzie Belle Wortz for \$6,000, "... the

amount due the bank and Building and Loan Association." The Manse property was used to secure the loan.

Despite the financial crunch, membership at Central continued to increase. Reverend Hefner commended the Congregation for attendance at a series of Friday noon services held during the fall. In November, Session members made plans for the annual "Every Member Canvas." And the budget committee set forth a 1937 budget of \$5,400. Exactly half of that would be paid to Reverend Hefner. In early December, the Pastor proposed a "Four Point Program for 1940" and outlined his goals for the last three years of the decade. "First, all local (church) debts be paid; second, 600 members on the roll; third, \$1,000 per year for benevolences; and fourth, a full-time secretary of Religious Education employed." His suggestions were enthusiastically endorsed by the Session.

One area not covered under Dr. Hefner's "Four Point Plan," but perhaps one that should have been, was the "problems of the youth of the Church." A youth survey had been conducted between Thanksgiving and Christmas, revealing surprisingly low marks in nurturing spiritual growth for young people. So on January 19, 1937, the church's Committee on Religious Education held a special meeting in the Youth Room. It was packed by parents, children and teachers. Out of the meeting came suggestions to begin a youth choir, another survey of "Young People's Societies," and the advisability of an adult leadership training course.

The Reverend Hefner had a busy Sunday on March 27th. A record 32 people joined the Church; many by letter, but others by confession. When those services were completed, 11 people -- including five infants -- were baptized. On June 6th, the Rev. Hefner noted that 148 persons took part in the quarterly Communion Service. That afternoon, the Pastor, the Clerk, and "Mr. Mills from the Session and Miss Roach and Mrs. Hutcheson from the Choir," visited the homes of several shut-ins and performed the Communion service. Having begun two or three years earlier, the "mobile" services were especially popular among older Church members.

In late June of 1937, Dr. Means presented the Session with a plan to allow a "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" to occupy a room in the church basement during the summer. Elders agreed to let them stay until October 1st. On October 8th, Elder Noble asked for "... an expression from the Board" on the matter, and it was agreed he would "... report back later." Although a search of later Session minutes could find no mention of the Smith occupancy, several church members later recalled that the Smiths lived at Central for several years and served as caretakers. Mrs. Smith was also active with the Sunday night youth programs. She was the one "who made sandwiches of whole wheat bread and grated raw carrots."

Aerial tragedies dominated the national news during the spring and summer months of 1937. On May 6th, the majestic dirigible Hindenburg exploded just as it was landing at Lakehurst, New Jersey, killing 34 people. Eight weeks later, famed aviatrix Amelia Earhart took off with navigator Fred Noonan on a round-the-world flight. They

disappeared somewhere over Holland Island in the South Pacific and despite a length search, were never found.

Two months after the search for Amelia was called off, Central Elders approved -- at a supper meeting -- a suggestion to divide the Session into two groups; one to handle the spiritual welfare of the members, the other the financial needs. All agreed the matter needed to be studied. In November, an operating budget of \$5,450 was proposed for 1938, an increase of \$50 over 1937. Two Elders spoke out on church attendance. Mr. Mills "explained the reasons some members give for not attending church," and Mr. Thornton said, "many of our members give poor excuses for not attending church." It was decided to hold a Vesper Service on December 19th.

By early 1938, horror stories about German treatment of Jewish citizens were filtering out of Europe, and there were reports of robbing, beating and even killings in some German and Polish cities by young Nazis. The pot of unrest in Hitler's camp was beginning to simmer, and many who had scoffed at the dictator earlier were now fearful he might disrupt the delicate balance of power in Europe. On March 11, 1939, his troops march into Austria.

Few in the Central congregation that spring seemed to be aware of the upcoming 50th anniversary of the Church's founding, but history of a sort was made at the annual meeting on April 6th. Acting further on a decision several months earlier to split the duties of the Elders, Special Committee Chairman R.K. Rodgers had proposed the names of 30 members to serve as Elders or Deacons. The 30 names were written on a blackboard in alphabetical order, and members were asked to vote for 12 Elders. After the 12 were chosen, the Congregation selected another 12 of the remaining 18 to serve as Deacons. Then, according to the Session notes, "Each of the Boards of 12 men after chosen shall retire to themselves for a division into three classes, to serve one, two and three years respectively." It was never explained just how the prospective Elders and Deacons agreed who would serve the varying terms. Perhaps they drew straws.

On Sunday, April 10th, Dr. Hefner read the instructions from the book of Church Order and obligated the following men to their duties:

**Elders**

**Deacons**

**Class of 1939**

Joe Conklin  
C.N. Geren  
J.M. Mills  
L.J. Noble

R.B. Hudson  
T.A. Porter  
M. Edwin Wright  
J.A. Yates

**Class of 1940**

O.A. Fentress

R. Earl Farnsworth

Jerry M. Geren	J.W. Price Jr.
S.W. Telford	R.K. Rodgers
R.A. Williams	J.D. Sample

### Class of 1941

Dr. C.S. Means	Fred Ferguson
Paul Menennoeh	W.H. Finkey
J.D. Sample Sr.	Charles N. Stephens
Ralph Thornton	E.A. Suggs

The reorganization of the Church officials continued at the April Session meeting. Elders divided themselves among the following committees: Worship, Membership and Evangelism, Christian Education, Benevolences, Ushering and Uses of the Building.

Tragedy struck the Central Manse on May 10th, when 12-year-old Paul Hefner, the Pastor's youngest son, suddenly died following a short illness. Dr. W.B. Miller, the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Van Buren, conducted the funeral services at Central on the following Tuesday.

The whole world seemed like a boiling cauldron in the fall of 1938; a monster hurricane sped up the Atlantic Coast and roared into New England, of all places, killing 500 and leaving thousands homeless; Hitler signed a "Peace Declaration" with Britain on September 30th, then sent troops into Czechoslovakia the next day; and Japanese soldiers continued their advance into China.

On September 28th, the Church held a huge fellowship dinner in the downstairs dining room and C.N. Geren was the "surprise" guest of honor on his 73rd birthday. According to Session Clerk Telford, "The largest crowd ever assembled for a dinner meeting was present and we are expecting splendid results from this social hour." The Session wrangled over the 1939 budget at their November meeting and finally adopted one totaling \$5,700. However, several Elders apparently argued over whether to pay the Organist the same salary as the Choir Director. When it was settled, the Musical Director got \$300 per year and the Church Organist only \$240 per year.

An example of Clerk Telford's ability to remain objective when documenting church business is seen in two brief reports, the first at a January 11, 1939, meeting. "Dr. Means spoke of Miss Fannie Arbuckle needing assistance and suggested that some attention be given to her. A motion to appoint a special committee to inquire into the matter and have a conference with Mr. Pettigrew regarding her case, was adopted." Two months later, on March 3rd, his entry is as follows: "Mr. J.M. Geren reported for the Committee on the Arbuckle-Pettigrew matter, and the committee was discharged with thanks for their services." There is no clue as to what may have happened that prompted the Session's action on the matter.

On March 8th, the Church Nominating Committee recommended the number of Elders in each class be increased from four to five, for a total of 15 members. They also decided to let retiring Deacons be elected as Elders without waiting a full year.

Despite gloomy headlines from an uneasy Europe, one of the most dazzling stories of the year began in New York in late April, with the opening of the World's Fair. Billing as presenting the "World of Tomorrow," it was a myriad of impressive exhibits from all nations on a 1,200-acre site. By the time it closed in late 1939, it drew more than 32-million visitors.

While the Fair was underway in June, Dr. Hefner proposed a resolution to the Session, urging their support in asking the Fort Smith Rodeo Committee planning the 1940 event to leave Sunday off their program for entertainment. There is no record whether other local churches endorsed Central's proposal or if the Rodeo Committee abided by it.

While the focal point of the World's Fair was peace, reality was moving the world in the opposite direction. On September 1st, Hitler's troops invaded Poland, and two days later British Prime Minister Chamberlain declared a "state of war" had begun between the two countries. Tensions increased rapidly in western Europe in the days that followed. Tensions were also higher than normal when Central Elders and Deacons met in early October. Discussion centered on why contributions had fallen off for the Building Fund, and what steps could be taken to increase contributions. It was agreed to combine the General Fund and the Building Fund, with a "Benevolence Drive" to be conducted in March.

During the last months of the decade of the 30s, people kept on trying to tune out the gloomy news from across the Atlantic. Throughout the year, they had flocked to movies in record number. They were treated to an array of films that made some experts consider 1939 to be the watershed year of the industry. Clark Gable and Vivian Leigh led the parade in "Gone With the Wine," followed by classics like "Goodbye Mr. Chips," "Stagecoach," "Union Pacific," "The Grapes of Wrath," and "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington."

The emergence of network radio during the decade had made big stars out of vaudeville entertainers Jack Benny and Bob Hope, and singers such as Bing Crosby. Dance bands were prevalent everywhere -- on radio, dance halls and college campuses. One of the newest "swing" bands rode to fame with their recording of a song young Jud Garland had sung in one of the year's movie flops, "The Wizard of Oz." Few people in Fort Smith, or the rest of the nation, at the end of 1939 realized that the mystical land "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" would soon seem so far away. Nor did they realize the young orchestra leader -- Glenn Miller -- would come to be so closely identified with the years that lay just ahead.

## Chapter V - Period of Adjustment: 1941-1949

The first week of the new decade brought a record snowstorm to Fort Smith, as seven to nine inches of snow blanketed the city. January 7th, the first Sunday, dawned cold and dreary, with temperatures in the 20's. Drifts up to two feet deep still blocked many side streets, and the attendance at Central Presbyterian Church was only 110, almost half from the week before. Dr. Hefner served communion to those in attendance, and later that afternoon, the Pastor, two Elders, Alma Roach and Dorothea Hutcheson negotiated the snowdrifts to serve communion to the shut-ins around the city.

Dark war clouds continued to hover as the war deepened in Europe. Most of the blows now fell on Great Britain, through regular bombing raids as the German "Luftwaffe" swept across the English Channel over the white cliffs of Dover. As Frenchmen retreated from Hitler's onrushing troops, sentiment over possible U.S. involvement in the European war remained divided. Most Americans paid scant attention to the developing war in the Far East between Japan and China.

Many pastors of Fort Smith churches were quoted in the SOUTHWEST AMERICAN as having experienced a year of growth in 1939. And it was no exception at Central Presbyterian. Rolls showed a gain of 40 over the year before, and while the congregation would be considered poor by today's standards, a serenity and adhesiveness kept it together.

The available physical space of the facility at the 9th and "B" was just about spoken for; many areas of the building did double duty. Various Sunday School classes were curtained off; when it came time for a family night dinner, the curtains were removed. That was often, because hardly a night went by when the church did not host some type of activity. Fund-raisers were common, and the church served as the center of family entertainment and fellowship.

In the early part of the 1940's, one of the most overworked members of the church was Dr. C.S. Means, who still made house calls around Fort Smith on a regular basis. Current member Dwight Sample recalls how Dr. Means would often arrive at Sunday morning services, direct from an all-night vigil at a patient's home. "When the phone rang in Dr. Hefner's office on Sunday mornings, I answered it. Usually it was someone trying to reach Dr. Means. We would go over to where he was sitting and relay the message."

Paris fell to the German armies in June of 1940, and England's R. A. F. began retaliating with night bombing runs over Berlin and other Nazi industrial areas. President Roosevelt petitioned Congress for a national defense program that would provide for a two-ocean Navy and 50,000 airplanes a year. Cost of the project was estimated at about \$8 billion.

As the United States slid closer to the war in Europe, Congress put into effect a one-year peacetime draft of able young men. Because of concern over the threats of war, American voters in November did something they had never done before. They re-elected Franklin

Roosevelt to an unprecedented third term, a landslide victory over Republican unknown Wendell Wilkie of Indiana.

The census of 1940 showed Fort Smith with a population of 36,584. That figure changed dramatically within a year. Word leaked out of Washington that a large wooded area just east of Fort Smith was being considered as the site for a new Army camp where troops would be trained for possible overseas duty. Construction of the new base -- called Camp Chaffee, after Major General Adna Chaffee, the father of the mechanized armed forces -- began in June. More than 5,000 Army engineers, civilian workers and their families moved into Fort Smith during the summer months to install the \$15 million project.

Sports fans had plenty to follow during the summer of 1941 besides the building of Chaffee and the crises in Europe and the Pacific. Ridden by Eddie Arcaro, a three-year-old colt named Whirlaway won racing's Triple Crown. Between May and July, the New York Yankees' Joe DiMaggio hit safely in 56 straight games. A young Boston Red Sox outfielder, Ted Williams, continued to bat over .400 -- winding up the 1941 season with a batting average of .406.

There is debate to this day whether some Americans knew in advance of the aggressive plans concerning the Japanese build-up of ships, planes, and troops in the far Pacific. At any rate, the surprise dawn attack on Hawaii's Pearl Harbor on Sunday, December 7th, caught most of the country completely off guard. The next day, President Roosevelt declared war on Japan and her Axis powers, Germany and Italy -- changing the whole course of the war.

Within a few weeks after the war declaration, Dr. Hefner met with the Session to decide how Central could best serve the spiritual and fellowship needs of many young men now converging on the new Camp Chaffee for training. In April of 1942, Session members chose a special committee to coordinate the relationship between the church and the military. Serving were Dwight Sample, Jr., Dale Crampton, Riley West, and L.M.R. Rogers.

The following month, the church purchased a Westminster Roll to record the names of all young Central men called to serve their country. The Session also voted to provide a small New Testament Bible for each of those called.

For the "G.I.'s" slated to take part in the Pacific warfare, the outlook was not good. The Japanese had taken over the Philippines and most of the small islands in the South Pacific. Thousands of United States troops died in what became known as the "Bataan Death March". The fighting was intense in strange-sounding places like Corregidor, the Coral Sea, and later in Guadalcanal, as two nations fought for control of the Pacific.

Back in the States, troops continued to roll out of Camp Chaffee and other training bases around the country. Civilians in Fort Smith and everywhere responded to the war effort. As men left jobs for far-off duty in Europe and the Pacific, women -- wives, mothers, and sweethearts -- stepped in to aid the war effort.

To conserve fuels and materials needed for building tanks, ships and planes, President Roosevelt initiated a rationing program for commodities such as gasoline, sugar, and other items. Rationing stamps were valuable in every home. Families were asked to save all scrap metal and tin cans. Schools conducted paper drives, and all who could purchased war bonds and saving stamps.

Members of Central responded to the war demands. The church was given \$35 per month from the Presbyterian Emergency Service Commission to assist with the care of the Chaffee troops. Central developed a ministry to visit and assist the young families of soldiers living in Fort Smith during their training period.

For the duration of the war, Fort Smith's only radio station -- KFPW -- made available a daily morning radio program to area churches. Churches took turns reading letters from members serving in the Armed Forces. The religious community of Fort Smith was also concerned about the availability of alcoholic spirits and their affect on young soldiers. Accordingly, Central joined with area churches in "Temperance Sunday" observances on the last Sunday in October of 1942.

About a week later, Central filled its long-vacant position of Choir Director, on at least a temporary basis. The Music and Education Committee reached agreement with Edna Earl Massey to take the job at the salary of \$50 per month.

Late in November, nearly 500 people celebrating the Thanksgiving holiday weekend died in Boston when fire swept the Coconut Grove night club. Before Thanksgiving, the Allied forces launched a massive invasion of North Africa. Many American servicemen, spending their first Christmas away from home, dreamed longingly of a "White Christmas"; Bing Crosby's song remained Number One for more than two months as 1942 passed into 1943.

Early in January, the church received a gift from Harlan Hunt, the father of current member Harlan Hunt, Junior. It was his own painting of "The Last Supper," which -- at this writing -- still hangs in the Fellowship Hall.

In the spring, horror stories about "Concentration Camps" began filtering out of Germany and Poland, where thousands of Jewish refugees from the war were being held prisoners. At some of the camps, Jews were reportedly being "exterminated" by the Nazis.

On the last day of March, a lanky cowboy strode out on a Broadway stage in New York singing "Oh What a Beautiful Morning". The audience loved it and Rogers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma" became a smash musical. Running over four years, it ushered in a new era of theater musicals.

Rain fell in record amounts on Fort Smith in May of 1943 --almost 15 inches for the month. Within days, the Arkansas River rose to record levels. Water roared through the west edge of Fort Smith nearly 20 feet above flood stage. Approaches to the Van Buren

bridge were washed out and the bottomlands around Moffett were completely submerged. For a time, the only way into or out of Fort Smith was to the south. Troops were called in from nearby Camp Chaffee to build a pontoon bridge to restore access to Van Buren. Three soldiers reportedly drowned in battling the flood and hundreds of Fort Smith residents filled sandbags to keep the Arkansas from creeping further up Garrison.

After the floodwaters receded in early June, Dr. Hefner startled the Central Session by stating his intention to resign his pastorate with the church, and asked the Ruling Elders to move toward finding another pastor. He asked that his resignation be effective in September. Thus would end the longest tenure of any Central pastor in history.

PHOTO: page 59

West end of Garrison Avenue as it appeared to the first Fort Chaffee soldiers about 1942. (Courtesy Old Fort Museum)

In August, Edna Earl Massey told the Session she could no longer be responsible for three choirs, and would stay only if her work was limited to the Chancel Choir. The Session agreed. Later in the month, the congregation elected Dr. C.S. Means and J.D. Sample, Sr. to accompany Dr. Hefner to the Presbytery meeting set for September 21st in Greenwood. Five days after that meeting, Central called the Reverend Arnold W. Langenberg as its new pastor.

On October 23rd, the Session minutes showed that S.E. Evans gave the church a check for \$3,500, to be presented by the Clerk of Session to Dr. Hefner, for "...his many years of faithful service to Central and the church's regrets at losing him." Dr. Hefner accepted a call at a Presbytery Church in Anadarko, Oklahoma, where he remained until his retirement in 1945. At that time, Dr. Hefner moved back to Fort Smith. In 1951, Central designated him as Pastor Emeritus, a title he held until his death on October 5, 1958.

The Reverend Langenberg, who at this writing is retired and living in Hastings, Nebraska, recalled that November day in 1943 when he and his wife Louella left northwest Iowa in a blinding snowstorm to take up residence in Fort Smith." What a pleasant surprise it was to arrive and find a beautiful sunny day in Fort Smith and see the fans operating in Central on my first day to preach."

The Reverend Langenberg said he was surprised at Central's involvement with the men and women in the service at Camp Chaffee, and his own records showed that more than 50 Central members were serving in the armed forces around the world. He indicated in a letter that he corresponded with all of them. As the war dragged on, hardly a day went by that the guest room in the Manse was not being occupied by parents, wives, or sweethearts of servicemen. Members of all churches, including Central, relied strongly on fellowship to keep up their spirits, as news from the battlefronts occasionally brought casualty reports of sons, daughters, friends and neighbors.

In 1944, the war began to turn more strongly in favor of the Allied Forces. General Dwight Eisenhower was named commander of the forces that would invade the European

mainland. After months of preparation and training, thousands of Allied troops came ashore on the French beaches of Normandy on June 6th, the great invasion called "D Day."

Special prayer services were held at Central's sanctuary at north 9th and "B", and the Reverend Langenberg said:

This is a solemn day, a momentous day in the world's history. We heard the old Liberty Bell ringing from Independence Hall this morning. We trust its ringing was prophetic of a new and better day, a day of peace and freedom for mankind. We gathered here today for prayer, and rightly so. Pray for our sons, our husbands, our fathers and our friends. This is not the time to talk about prayer. This is the time to pray!

The Reverend Langenberg felt strongly that new members should have a reasonable insight into Presbyterian beliefs and church government. Consequently, he asked for Session approval to conduct communicant classes. The Session concurred, and the classes have been held for new Central members -- adults and youth alike -- ever since.

A little earlier in the spring of 1944, the congregation approved an action taken by the Session -- a rare decision of esteem to recognize Elders C.N. Geren, Oscar Fentress and J.M. Mills as Trustees, "For Life". There is no other mention of a church officer being elected to this position, but the Presbyterian "Book of Order", as of this writing, prohibits such action.

Later in the year, Dr. C.S. Means died. In his memory, the Session decided that for a period of one year, the following would appear at the bottom of church bulletins: "in Memoriam to Dr. Charles S. Means." A Bible Study class to this day is named in his honor.

In November of 1944, President Roosevelt was elected to a fourth term; this time a landslide victory over New York Governor Thomas E. Dewey. The war in the Pacific had reached a turning point a few weeks earlier with a U.S. victory in the Battle of Leyte Gulf. The Japanese mainland was now within easy striking distance of Allied bombers. Early in 1945 came the final assault on all German fronts. Russian troops moved through Poland to the eastern border, as British soldiers moved slowly toward the Rhine River. The Nazis were caught in a deadly Allied vise that squeezed more tightly each day.

Fort Smith residents cheered the action a little more loudly in January, when an authentic war hero returned home on leave. Colonel William Orlando Darby had just been promoted to brigadier general, and a citywide celebration honored the highly decorated war veteran. The young Darby had formed the First Ranger Battalion in 1942, a paratroop strike force that saw lengthy action behind the lines of the Italian front. Darby soon went back to Italy but returned home among the nation's war dead a few weeks later. He was buried with traditional military honors in the Fort Smith National Cemetery.

An ailing President Roosevelt was savoring the Georgia sunshine at his Warm Springs retreat when he collapsed and died April 12th. A stunned nation saw leadership pass to Vice President Harry Truman, a political unknown from Independence, Missouri. But news of the president's death was muted in the Fort Smith area, because a tornado touched down that same afternoon near Poteau and swept northeastward through Dora, Greenwood Junction and Clarksville. At least 15 people were killed and scores were injured. Other storms struck extreme northwest Arkansas with equal fury.

However, despair quickly turned to joy with the surrender of Germany on May 8th. President Truman went on radio with the official announcement and in Fort Smith and cities across the country, spontaneous celebrations erupted and people danced in the streets.

PHOTO: page 62

Officers of Central's Women's Association, 1945-1946. (left to right) Mrs. George Wright, Mrs. Fred Ferguson, Mrs. R.B. Hudson, Mrs. C.H. Elswick.

President Truman reached a big decision three months later when he ordered the crew of the "Enola Gay" to drop a new "A-Bomb" on the Japanese city of Hiroshima on August 5th. Eight days and another A-Bomb later, the Japanese formally surrendered. After more than three and a half years of fighting, World War II was over! American soldiers were coming home to the "Post War Society."

"Sentimental Journey" was the Number One song in the country during the summer of 1945, and the G-I's returning home probably took such trips as they tried to adjust to civilian life. Within months, Fort Chaffee was deactivated and a building boom was on; so was a baby boom.

Military might lingered on the gridiron that fall of 1945, as Army, led by Glenn Davis and Doc Blanchard, rolled through another undefeated season as the top football team in the country. In October, the Detroit Tigers downed the Chicago Cubs in the World Series, the last time the Cubs would win a pennant in more than 40 years.

"Veteran" members of Central Presbyterian Church were quickly accepted back into the fold, and honored at various church functions on into 1946. In May, the Session filled the post of Choir Director by giving the job to Earl Farnsworth.

On November 4, 1946, the Reverend Langenberg told the congregation he was resigning to take a staff position with his alma mater at the Dubuque Theological Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa. A congregational meeting was called November 17th to act upon his resignation. Elder R.K. Rodgers was named to represent the congregation at Presbytery, seeking to have the pastoral relationship dissolved.

The search for a new Central minister didn't take long. On January 8, 1947, the Pastor Nominating Committee put forth the name of the Reverend C.E. Cathey, pastor of a church in Maryville, Tennessee. He accepted the terms, and was installed as Central's

pastor on February 23rd. The Rev. Cathey was working with a church budget for the year of \$15,600. When the Session formulated the budget in late 1946, they voted to establish a "contingent building fund" to be used at a later date for the eventual construction of a new church. It was agreed \$2,000 would be put into the fund as "seed money," with \$1,200 to be added each year. Most Central members knew that a new and larger sanctuary was probably several years away, so they worked to acquire as much nearby space as possible. Early in 1947 they approved the purchase of a garage building adjacent to the property at 9th and "B".

About this same time Fort Smith obtained a second radio station. KFSA went on the air in February, ending KFPW's 17-year domination as the only station in the immediate area. The new station was soon purchased by publisher Don Reynolds, who already bought the SOUTHWEST AMERICAN newspaper. A third Fort Smith radio station, KWHN, went on the air in November of the same year.

As Fort Smith residents became even more radio conscious, they could also now hear the Rev. Cathey's sermons broadcast each Sunday morning. The church contracted with station KRKN to broadcast the services, free of charge.

National news events were tragic in the spring of 1947. An explosion and fire at an oil refinery near Houston left more than 500 people dead and thousands injured. Telephone service across the country was disrupted in April when Bell Telephone operators staged their first strike in history. The Brooklyn Dodgers drew national attention that spring when they brought a promising rookie into their lineup -- the first black to play in the major leagues. But Jackie Robinson's competitive spirit quieted his hecklers, and paved the way for other blacks to join the game later.

Also during 1947, the Session decided to shift the three-year terms of Elders and Deacons to a calendar year basis. To acquaint young people of the church with the workings of the Session, the Ruling Elders voted to permit two representatives of the young people's class to sit in on the meetings of the Elders and Deacons. The first two chosen were Sally (Crampton) Naucke and Dwight Edward Sample.

Late in 1947, one of Central's Women's Circles asked the Session if they could use the church's educational facility for a round-robin Bridge Tournament. According to the Session notes, the Ruling Elders deliberated the matter and decided the tournament might cause criticism, and instead suggested to the ladies they could hold a rummage sale, "...if they so desired."

Earlier that same year, the Sparks Hospital Guild had discussed the possibility of forming a community theater group as one of their projects. The idea was enthusiastically received. Shortly before Thanksgiving, a number of aspiring local actors and actresses entertained a sellout crowd at the Darby Junior High School auditorium with a drama, "Mr. and Mrs. North." The Fort Smith Little Theater was born, and has been an anchor for the city's cultural activities ever since.

The nation of India drew headlines in early 1948, when Hindu spiritual leader Mahatma Gandhi was shot and killed by a Hindu fanatic. Religion of sorts was making headlines and newscasts almost daily with the separation of Palestine and the influx of Jewish settlers to the Free State of Israel, which was formally established May 14, 1948. But the turmoil in the Middle East was almost overshadowed by the Russian blockade of Berlin. Russia objected to the plan proposed by the Secretary of State George Marshall to rehabilitate the "free" nations of Europe. The U.S. and other countries initiated the "Berlin Airlift," to provide food and necessities for the "trapped" residents of the city.

Some members of the Central congregation also felt trapped because of the crowded conditions at 9th and "B". It was clear that Central was outgrowing its building. In the fall of 1948, five elders -- Earl Farnsworth, R.B. Hudson, Campbell Glover, William C. McLachlan, and Dwight Sample, Jr. -- were appointed as a long-range planning committee to study the future needs of the church and make recommendations to the Session.

Perhaps the biggest surprise of 1948 came on the morning of November 3rd, when Fort Smith residents and other voters around the country awoke to learn that President Truman had been elected to a term on his own. In one of the biggest upsets in political history, the feisty former vice-president had outpolled Republican Thomas E. Dewey, considered by oddsmakers a shoo-in for the White House.

On January 10, 1949, the two church boards met with Dr. A.B. Keeler of the Building Aid Department of the Board of National Missions. They discussed the financing of a new church, local source for revenue, and various building sites around Fort Smith. At the same meeting, the group approved a motion to merge the present Elders and Deacons, creating a Session board of 27 members.

Halfway around the world, Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek lost his battle to keep the Communists out of China, and retreated to Formosa. "Red" China would soon become a household word. Few realized how the Communist threat in Asia would bring American troops back to war in less than two years.

As the decade of the embattled 40's drew to a close, most of the world was eager to forget the horrors of World War II. By 1949, gross production was up, and so was inflation. Television antennas were sprouting on rooftops. A new Rogers and Hammerstein musical, "South Pacific," was enthralling Broadway, and strains of "Some Enchanted Evening" were heard on radios all over the country. With the retirement of Joe Louis, the world heavyweight boxing crown passed to Ezzard Charles after he knocked out "Jersey" Joe Walcott. Sam Snead, Ben Hogan, and Cary Middlecoff dueled for golf supremacy. And Broderick Crawford won an Oscar in the award-winning movie, "All the King's Men."

Throughout 1949, the congregation of Central Presbyterian Church planned, worked and prayed that the arrival of a new decade might also mean a new church, bringing reality to a dream that was now more than two decades old.



## Chapter VI - A New Home: 1950 -1959

Perhaps the 1950s hold some of the most nostalgic and poignant memories for today's members of Central. In the aftermath of World War II, the church continued to grow and strengthen. The SOUTHWEST AMERICAN newspaper reminded its readers that it was a sign of good luck when the first day of a new year fell on Sunday. And Sunday it was, when on January 1, 1950, church members met for their first Communion service of the New Year.

With Dr. Charles Cathey as pastor and moderator of the Session, the church was looking diligently for any available space that could be utilized for Sunday School classrooms. The congregation meeting at 9th and "B" had grown to a size that regularly overflowed the sanctuary. The ground floor of the building had been partitioned off to afford more classroom space, and there was little excess left.

In June of 1950, the Building Advisory Committee presented a plan to the Session that would solve the problems of the small church at 9th and "B". By secret ballot, the Session voted to present it the congregation a plan to acquire three lots at what is now Greenwood and Dodson Avenues, for the purpose of building a new Central Presbyterian Church! On June 25th, the congregation voted 58 to 10 in favor of the Session plan.

Money for the church was still, as ever, hard to come by. However, a commitment was made that day to pay \$4,750 for the lots, through a loan from Merchants National Bank. Not long after the vote to buy the lots, A.J. Geren and his wife offered to give the lots to the congregation for the building site in exchange for the congregational commitment to raise the \$4,750, which would be placed in a separate fund earmarked for construction and additional land acquisitions. The congregation agreed to accept the generous gift, as well as the challenge from the Geren family.

On the Sunday in June when the congregation voted, war broke out in Korea. The United Nations was protesting North Korea's invasion of South Korea and the crossing of the 38th parallel.

The war in Korea was not the only major problem facing America. In the early weeks of 1950, the nation was plagued by rumors of Communist spies in high political positions. As Jacob Malek -- the Soviet delegate to the United Nations -- walked out on the U.N. Security Council meetings because Nationalist China was allowed a seat of representation, Americans followed with great interest the news of the Alger Hiss trial. Hiss was eventually convicted and sentenced to prison for passing top national secrets to the self-avowed Communist agent, Whittaker Chambers.

Americans may have been tempted to put this incident aside. But, in late February, a young British scientist, Dr. Klaus Fuchs, confessed to having given up top secret information to Soviet spies, Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. He had passed along to them all the details needed for the Soviet manufacture of the atomic bomb. Although the

Rosenberg trials made headline news for months, it was not until March 1951 that they were found guilty and sentenced to death for the crime of committing atomic espionage. Both verdicts and sentences were upheld upon appeal, and the Rosenbergs were executed in June 1953.

Perhaps these incidents, along with Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-red campaign, contributed to American speculations regarding flying saucers. "Unidentified Flying Objects" became a popular topic of conversation among the young and old alike in communities across America. Lack of scientific explanation for some of the reportings led to the conclusions by many that the United States was either being visited by creatures from outer space, or spied upon by the Russians. Neither belief gave comfort from the anxiety the church members must have felt at the realization that communism was a very real threat to the freedom of worship and prosper as God led and directed.

Prior to the 1950s, the Junior League of Fort Smith had opened a day nursery in the rectory building of St. John's Episcopal Church. According to Oie Faulk, author of FORT SMITH, AN ILLUSTRATED HISTORY, on January 25, 1950, this group also formed the Fort Smith Service League. Its main purpose was to operate a retail store called the Bargain Box; business profits would be used to fund the day nursery, purchase a Bookmobile, and award scholarships. Volunteers of the organization also gave unselfishly of their time at the Crippled Children's Clinic.

Major business ventures were also formed in the 1950s. It was at this time that the Udouj family organized the Twin River Corporation -- a forerunner to Riverside Furniture. And the Fort Smith Chamber of Commerce -- realizing the need for economical stability in the city -- put together a plan to lure other manufacturing plants to the area. The spasmodic openings and closings of Fort Chaffee had left the town in an economic upheaval. Fortunately, through the work of the Chamber, new industry was brought into the city -- much of which is still here and strongly influencing the economic stability of Fort Smith!

Meanwhile, bodies of American soldiers were being returned home. Although all had died defending the same freedoms, President Truman had to intervene for an American Indian to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery. It is ironic, that in this same year, in a country where Black people still sat at the back of city buses and entered restaurants from a separate entrance, the winner of the 1950 Nobel Peace Prize was a Black American named Ralph Bunche!

By the end of the year, Central Presbyterian had a building committee assigned to oversee the construction of a new church facility. On the Building Committee were:

R.B. Hudson - Chairman  
King Basham - Secretary  
Claude Elswick - Treasurer  
Campbell Glover - Plans  
Dale Crampton - Finance  
Ed Pevehouse - Publicity  
Mrs. Y.A. Yates - Memorials

Forming the Construction Committee were Dale Carmpton, King Basham, and R.B. Hudson, as an ex-officio member. By the Spring of 1951, Central had committed to purchase enough property that the congregation was ready to begin architectural plans for the new sanctuary on Dodson and Greenwood. However, at almost the last minute, the Session was informed of an opportunity that pushed aside all preceding ideas. Radio Station KFPW, located on the corners of Rogers Avenue and Lecta, decided to sell its property! On May 18, 1951, in a special called meeting of the Session, it was agreed to pay \$50,000 for the KFPW property -- putting \$10,000 down and financing \$40,000 at 4% interest for three years. In the same meeting it was agreed to sell the lots previously purchased for the amount of \$10,550.

On June 6th the congregation met to approve the recommendations of Session -- this was done by a unanimous standing vote! Tuesday nights were set aside as "work nights" at the new church site. Men, women and children gathered to prepare the buildings for the temporary worship site and Sunday school rooms. The old Barry home which had housed the KFPW studios was to be used for most church activities. However, much remodeling, such as the installation of a kitchen and other facilities, had to be done before it was feasible to start meeting at the new location for Sunday worship services. When the work was completed, however, the Barry home became known at Central as the Parish House. It was there that the Central members gathered to worship God, study the Word, unite in friendship, celebrate special occasions, and mourns the loss of loved ones.

Excitement mounted as Session appointed Elders Dale Crampton, Campbell Glover and King Basham to contact an architect to draw plans for the new site. Also, with Dale Crampton in charge, a financial campaign was put in motion to raise the necessary funds for the construction of the new sanctuary. As early as September 1951, R.B. Hudson presented the Session with a set of building plans for consideration. In November the Session authorized construction plans to be printed for the new building project. The congregation voted in December to sell the Dodson Avenue property to Continental Oil Company for the sum of \$10,000. In the Session meeting held the following day, R.B. Hudson was authorized to sell the property on 9th and "B" at a price of \$47,500 for the church, or \$65,000 for the church and the annex building.

The building program was not the only source of excitement for Central in the year of 1951. To make the church mailing a lot easier and time effective, a new addressograph machine was purchased. The church also purchased a new movie projector. And -- ever mindful that Christianity does not stop at the church door, or the city limits -- the Session voted to designate \$125 to the One Great Hour of Sharing Offering to help with Korean Relief.

In 1952, "Ike" Eisenhower, and Richard Nixon, became the Republican presidential and vice-presidential candidates. The Democrats nominated Governor Adlai Stevenson of Illinois and Alabama Senator John Sparkman as their candidates. Also in 1952, England

had a change in monarchs. Upon the death of King George VI, twenty-five year-old Elizabeth became Queen Elizabeth II.

On May 28, 1952, the congregation agreed to accept an offer on the purchase of the church building at 9th and "B" -- Central Nazarene Church was willing to pay \$32,500. Although \$15,000 less than what the Session hoped for, the funds would certainly go a long way toward the money needed for the building fund. Fortunately, the Session had found other ways to acquire some of the needed funds. It was finally agreed to petition the Board of National Missions for a \$10,000 grant to the building fund. At the same time it was hoped the Mission Board would make the church a non-interest bearing loan in the amount of \$15,000.

Dr. Cathey, along with the members of the Finance Committee, issued a challenge to all the church members to make a conscientious effort to tithe. One church brochure stated that \$85,000 was needed in pledges over a thirty month period. This was not thought to be an impossible task as \$42,000 had been raised in the previous eighteen months. Only \$50,000 would have to be borrowed to complete the building of the sanctuary and the remodeling of the Parish House.

The Central congregation was not the only group requiring grit and determination to complete the projects and expansion in the 50s. The Fort Smith Girls Club was trying to raise \$100,000 for the construction of a new gymnasium which would encompass an Olympic-size swimming pool! The Fort Smith Boys Club had just enlarged its facilities on Wheeler Avenue. Its program was so successful that by 1956 a new facility, the Jeffrey Memorial Boys Club was built near what is now known as Westark Community College. June of 1957 brought the dedication of the Evans Playground near Whirlpool.

Meanwhile, on the other side of the globe, plans were being made for the upcoming Olympic Games. After twelve years of absence, the Soviet Union was once again entering the Games which would be held in Helsinki, Finland. Ceremonies were scheduled to open August 2, 1952.

The world population was definitely on the move by 1952. The auto industry reached an all time high in sales. It was during the 50s that General Motors Corporation introduced the first cars with air-conditioning systems. Not to be outdone, the airlines were beginning to offer incentives to increase air travel. On May 1, 1952, Trans World Airlines created its lower rate tourist class air service. Just two weeks prior to this, on April 15th, President Truman signed the Japanese Peace Treaty, which officially ended World War II in the Pacific region.

In the November Presidential elections, Eisenhower won a decisive victory over opponent Stevenson. During his campaign speeches, Eisenhower had promised Americans that he would personally go to Korea for the purpose of talking peace. On December 17, 1952, he embarked on the promised trip. By the end of 1952, the Session had authorized two Sunday morning worship services as well as mid-week prayer services. The mid-week prayer meetings were followed by study sessions. Weekly

visitations to the prospective new members were also a regular part of the church program.

Religion was becoming big business in the mid-50s. The Jehovah's Witnesses had scheduled a world wide meeting of their organization in the summer of 1953. The group, which met in Yankee Stadium, reportedly baptized over 4,600 people in a single day! However, an event which was far more reaching to Christians around the globe was a publishing of a new translation of the Bible. After 15 years of work by thirty-two scholars, the Revised Standard Version of the Bible was published. Although accepted with hesitancy, it paved the way for other translations in future years.

It was about this same time that Norman Vincent Peale published his renowned book, "The Power of Positive Thinking." Ernest Hemingway won a Nobel Prize for "The Old Man and the Sea," and famous mystery writer Agatha Christie had a new play called "Mousetrap" which opened in London.

Entertainment was brought into many homes with the rising popularity of television. Children of the 50s grew up on television programs such as "Howdy Doody," the "Mickey Mouse Club" and "Captain Kangaroo.. Adults enjoyed the exploits of famous T.V. lawyer Perry Mason; fought gun battles with Matt Dillon of "Gunsmoke," laughed through "I Love Lucy" and dreamed of being on the receiving end of the check presented by "The Millionaire." Along with "soaps," housewives watched the "Loretta Young Theatre," and "Ozzie and Harriet" were America's favorite family.

Members at Central probably would have well enjoyed a visit from television's fictional Millionaire. For in January of 1953, Dale Crampton reported the Church still needed \$25,469 before construction could be started on the sanctuary. When the Session met on January 28th, the first Sunday of March was set for the Ground Breaking Ceremony for the new sanctuary. The church Trustees were instructed to enter into a contract with the Manhattan Construction Company to build the new sanctuary in accordance with the plans and specifications drawn up by Architects Haralson and Mott. The total contract price was to be \$156,329.

It seems that everything was on "go" when Manhattan Construction was asked to review its bid and J.K. Fraser, a local company was invited to place a bid on the building project in an effort to resolve the problem of the \$25,000 shortfall. The Ground Breaking Ceremony was cancelled until further notice. In a Congregational meeting held March 22nd, the situation was reviewed and at a meeting held March 29th, the congregation voted to award the building contract to J.K. Fraser Company. The next day, the trustees met at the home of A.J. Geren to sign a contract with the J.K. Fraser Company.

Just a few days later an offer \$14,000 was accepted for the purchase of the church annex property at 9th and "B". On April 6th, after authorizing the trustees to sign loan papers with the First Federal Building and Loan Company in the amount of \$60,000, the Session scheduled Sunday, April 12th, at 10:45 a.m. as the time for the official Ground Breaking Ceremonies.

PHOTO: page 73

Elder Jack Geren breaks ground for the new Central Church on Rogers Avenue as Pastor Charles Cathey looks on, April 1953.

What an event! THE SOUTHWEST AMERICAN carried an announcement on Friday, April 9th, telling of the upcoming event. Then on Monday, the newspaper published a picture of A.J. Geren "turning the earth" as Dr. Cathey read scriptures beside him. With approximately 350 members and friends gathered on the front lawn to witness the occasion, one can only imagine the thoughts going through the minds of those present. For some it may have been an occasion mixed with joy as well as a hint of sadness. Maybe the sadness was for a loved one not present to share the reality of the dream which the congregation had worked at for so long. Perhaps some remembered laying the cornerstones for the church recently sold on 9th and "B" Streets. Many probably thought of all the fund raising campaigns and pledge cards which had been signed -- and the faithfulness with which those pledge cards had been carried out. Most certainly there were Elders and Trustees who were realizing that this was not an end but was in fact only a different phase of a work which must go on for generations yet to come. As the congregation dispersed on that day of joy and excitement there were undoubtedly many prayers offered for the continued success of the growing band of Christians.

As Central built, Holt Krock Clinic continued its medical expansion. In 1953 the clinic moved from the facilities on North 11th Street to its present location on Dodson Avenue. By the end of the 50's specialty medicine was offered at Holt Krock in the fields of internal medicine, urology, proctology, radiology, orthopaedics, anesthesia, and cobalt therapy. During this same period, Sparks Hospital had expanded. It was in 1953 that the new Sparks building on North "I" Street was dedicated.

That summer, Central members joined the rest of the nations in celebration of the Korean Armistice which began July 28th. It was estimated that during the war more than 100,000 American soldiers were reported injured with some 25,000 dead. It was feared by many that Korea would not keep the Armistice and war would break out before a treaty could be signed.

Because of the homeless multitudes in South Korea, President Eisenhower petitioned Congress for two hundred million dollars to be used for emergency aid to South Korea. As world leaders worked to wrap up another war, sports fans listened or watched as the New York Yankees won their fifth consecutive World Series. The Yankees defeated the Brooklyn Dodgers four games to three to give the Yanks their sixteenth world championship!

By August 1953, the United States and the Soviets were in the beginning stages of an arms race. It was suspected that the Soviets were in the lead with their development of a hydrogen bomb small enough to be carried in an airplane. As of yet, however, the United States had not developed a bomb small enough for air transport.

Although not leading in the arms race, American peace efforts did not go unnoticed. Former Secretary of State George C. Marshall was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for his revitalization program to rebuild and stabilize the European economy which had been destroyed by the war.

In 1954, Senator Joseph McCarthy made the Senate floor a private battlefield for his war on communism. According to Richard Currents in his book entitled "A Survey of American History," McCarthy brought about his own downfall by his "villainous" conduct which was televised during the Senate Committee hearings. After having spread doubt on the communist influence in nearly every department of the government, including the White House, McCarthy was condemned by the Senate for "conduct unbecoming a Senator."

Fortunately, the communist scare did not dampen the American spirit for ant length of time. There was still that determined congregation at Central taking a building program a step at a time. And even as they did, an obscure man, celebrating his nineteenth birthday, walked into a Memphis recording studio and recorded his first song. The young man was destined to become an American legend -- his name was Elvis Presley.

One might wonder if Elvis, at that age, even paid attention to the history made a few days later when Mamie Eisenhower christened the Nautilus, America's first atomic powered submarine. Some felt that it was the success of the Nautilus which earned Hyman Rickover the permanent rank of Rear Admiral in the United States Navy.

Also making news was the progress of the building program at Central Presbyterian. In one of its regularly scheduled Session meetings, the Elders voted to send a note of thanks to the SOUTHWEST AMERICAN for all the "favorable publicity" that the paper had given the church. In the February meeting of 1954, Campbell Glover was appointed to chair a committee which would prepare a program for the dedication of the new building.

Mrs. Aubrey Yates had been busy during the past year keeping track of gifts and funds given to furnish the new sanctuary. The Women's Association provided the sanctuary carpeting and others generously contributed pews, candlesticks, hymnals, choir stoles, pulpits, baptismal fount, and memorial windows and shutters. For generations, all these members would be remembered for their generosity and their gifts.

Lest too much emphasis be places on the monetary contributions made for the material success of the Church, it is well to remember that Central was also a church of loving, caring persons. There were church programs and church leaders who spent hours each week to strengthen the spiritual lives of the congregation and community. The church sponsored Boy Scout Troop 12 for many years. There is much reference in the Session minutes regarding the occasional problems which arose in finding adequate meeting space for this group of young men. Scout leaders such as Earl Farnsworth, Amos Spicer, Finley Turner, Clifton Grace and Dennis Carmack took a great deal of interest in the scouting program.

Church Elders also paid particular attention to the request of the women of the Church. It was not uncommon for the President of the Women's Association to be invited to attend the Session meetings during the decade of the 50's. Reports from the Women's Association were submitted to the Session on a regular basis. The Elders were even polite in planning church activities in which the aid of the church women would be needed. When the Session voted to invite the Synod to meet at Central, it was noted that the invitation would be extended "... if this invitation meets with the approval of the Women's Organization."

Although these sessional invitations were generally approved, there was at least one occasion reported in the minutes when an invitation for fellowship at Central was not extended due to "... prior commitments made by the Women of the Church." During the years of fund raising for the new sanctuary, Mary Ann Lyon reported that the women of the church were indeed busy! It was very common for them to be engaged in hosting arts and crafts bazaars or serving meals to raise the necessary building funds. At one point the group was so involved that the President of the Women's Association had to call a temporary halt to fundraising campaigns -- such was the zeal of the women at Central!

Meanwhile, the dedication service was set for Palm Sunday, April 11, 1954. (Lacking only one day having been a year since the Ground Breaking Ceremony!) Twenty-five hundred memorial bulletins were ordered for use at the dedication services and to send to church friends. Souvenir postcard pictures were provided by a local photographer.

It was indeed a proud occasion as Palm Sunday dawned at Central Presbyterian Church! Mrs. Hugh Wilder, President of the Women's Association, was the organist for the dedication service -- A. J. Geren, Chairman of the Board of Trustees, officially opened the doors of the new sanctuary! Pastor Emeritus Dr. Elbert Hefner delivered the Call to Worship, and the congregation joined in singing the processional hymn, "The Church's One Foundation." As chairman of the building committee, Dale Crampton presented the church keys to Dr. Cathey. The congregation joined with Dr. Cathey in a responsive Act of Dedication. Special guests assisting in the worship service were Dr. Shell, from the Presbytery of Arkansas, and Dr. Magus, Moderator of the Synod of Oklahoma. Flowers at the altar were given by the Session in memory of all the Elders who had served in the years past.

As Dr. Cathey delivered his sermon "I Believe in the Church," surely visitors and members alike felt a sense of awe and excitement as they got their first view of the new sanctuary. It was with deep conviction that the congregation joined in the recessional hymn, "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken!" According to the Session notes there were approximately 500 people present for the dedication services, with nearly 1,000 visitors later that afternoon during Open House.

Although the dedication services were completed, loan arrangements were not finalized until May 5th. On that date, trustees A.J. Geren, J.A. Yates, C.H. Elswick and R.K. Rodgers met with Dr. Cathey and Secretary J.M. Mills at the office of R.K. Rodgers in the First Federal Building. Loan papers from the First Federal Savings and Loan had been

completed and were now ready for examination by the Trustees. After reading the documents, a note and mortgage was signed in the amount of \$62,000.00. A second note and mortgage was signed in the amount of \$20,000.00 to the National Board of Missions.

In the April Session meeting it was voted to put the Manse on the market for sale. In June, the Session met again and made preliminary plans to purchase a new manse. In a congregational meeting August 30th, the members voted to authorize the purchase of a new church manse -- the price of which was not to exceed \$20,000. The Trustees were also authorized, at this time, to seek a loan for this purchase. On September 15th a new manse at 53rd and Park replaced the old manse at 809 North 15th.

In December, 1954, the Trustees were authorized to borrow \$7,000 to pay the balance of the indebtedness on the sanctuary construction. At the same meeting, Dale Crampton reported that the total amount of money paid for the construction of the new sanctuary came to \$152,266.58! This figure did not include funds which had been used to repair and renovate the Parish House.

Naturally the "Centralites" were proud of the beautiful house of worship which had just been completed! So proud, in fact, that the Junior College (Westark) was invited to hold baccalaureate services in the new sanctuary for the 1954 graduating class on May 30th. An invitation was also extended to the Synod for a meeting to be held at Central during the following year.

Weddings were happy occasions at Central. According to member Pauline Sample, Pat Farnsworth was the last bride to be married in the Parish House. The first weddings in the new sanctuary were those of Mary Jo Campbell and of Rosemary Farnsworth.

In September of 1954, Dr. Cathey tendered his resignation. It was with deep regret that the congregation agreed to release him from his pastoral duties. The Church had grown both spiritually and in physical size during Dr. Cathey's tenure. To show its love and appreciation to the Cathey family, a silver tea service was given to them as a departing gift. Dr. Cathey was also given permission to store his numerous literary volumes in the room above the church office until he had settled into his new home in Columbus, Ohio.

With R.K. Rodgers as chairman, the nominating committee, consisting of George Crawford, Dr. Henry Sims, Mrs. Dale Crampton, Miss Alma Roach and J. Aubrey Yates, started the task of finding a replacement for Dr. Cathey. In the meantime, Dr. Hefner was asked to fill the pulpit until a new minister was found.

Although the 60s would most likely become the years most frequently referred to as the decade of equal rights, the foundation for those changes was laid during the 50s. Haunted by cases of injustice and segregation between the white and black races, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in May of 1954 that racial segregation was unconstitutional. An even less popular decision was the reaffirmation in May 1955, that the public education in the United States must be conducted without racial discrimination. These rulings were to lead to much contention and discontent in school districts all across America.

Shortly after the first of the year the nominating committee submitted the name of Reverend Robert Lowell Stone as a candidate to accept the call as the new minister. On January 13, 1955, Reverend Stone was extended an invitation by the congregation. He accepted the call and was installed on January 23rd.

Under fresh leadership, Central greeted the new year with enthusiasm. Reverend Stone obtained permission from the Session to begin weekly newsletter publication. On February 27th members and friends of Central received their first issue of "The Spire." The weekly paper carried reminders of upcoming events, various other messages from the minister and session, as well as the program for the following Sunday Worship Service. Activities were added to the church program also. Wednesday nights were set aside for prayer meetings and the visitation of new prospective members. Sunday night services were also conducted.

In September, the Session voted to approve Friday nights at the Church as "Teen" night. The young people were enjoying their own "rock and roll" music, with the arrival of "Rock Around the Clock" on the music charts.

At this same meeting, the Session authorized Reverend Stone to invite John Reed from the Board of National Missions to come to Central to make a fund drive. For several months the Session explored the need and feasibility of sponsoring a church kindergarten. After much discussion, Session approved this new ministry and in September 1955, Central Presbyterian began its first kindergarten program!

This seemed to be a timely decision, for Fort Smith had grown so much that progress was quite apparent everywhere one traveled. The joint efforts of the Industrial Foundation and the Fort Smith Chamber of Commerce really did bring about economic changes in the 50s. By the end of the decade, the population of Fort Smith had increased by nearly 5,000 people! Some of this growth, most likely, was due to the transportation system which was emerging in the area. For instance, there were not only two railroads but also 28 trucking firms serving Fort Smith. Transportation service also included two bus lines, air passenger service and air freight service as well. It had indeed become a very mobile society.

During this time, funds were appropriated to improve the Arkansas River navigation system. Although the work was begun during the 50s, it was not until the next decade that the McClellan-Kerr Waterway was opened to barge navigation. With transportation being offered by bus, air, rail and water, it was inevitable that Fort Smith would become the center of much activity.

The center of activity at Central Presbyterian was found in the Session meetings! Once again it was that time of year when plans were made for the upcoming year -- and as usual, money was the main ingredient missing to insure success in the ministry of the church. Reverend Stone proposed that if each family would contribute three percent of its annual take-home pay to cover the expenses of the Current and Benevolence fund, the

church budget could be covered. It was also suggested that an additional three percent given to the church's building fund would retire the church debt within three years. Retirement if the church debt was a serious issue as Central had grown in size and ministry to the extent that once again there was a lack of room for educational activities!

In the midst of this flurry of activity there were times when sadness spread through the congregation over the death of a beloved member, or the moving away of a dear church friend. In 1955, members attended the funeral of Mrs. Ella Leavitt, for whom the Ella Leavitt Sunday School class is named. In December of the same year, A.J. Geren's name was added to the necrology records. Mr. Geren had been a member of the Board of Trustees and a part of the Session of Central Presbyterian as long as many members could remember. He had also been a staunch supporter during the building of the new sanctuary. And there were others who were missed as well. The list of those no longer with the congregation was lengthy; however, each one missing held a very special place in the heart of somebody left behind.

And so it was with Dr. Hefner. On February 26, 1956, he was to deliver the sermon at Central. On Saturday, prior to that service, his wife Zelma had undergone surgery and the doctor told Dr. Hefner that his wife's disease was beyond anything medicine could do for her. With great strength, Dr. Hefner still preached the sermon the next day. A notation written by him on his church bulletin read, "... What we must do, by the Grace of God, we can do". Mrs. Hefner died two weeks later on March 14th.

Even as the church mourned its losses, time marched forward and brought challenges which had to be met. On May 21, 1956, the United States continued its arms race with the Soviet Union by dropping an experimental hydrogen bomb over Namu Island in the Pacific -- only days before LIFE MAGAZINE was to arrive at Central Presbyterian Church. It seems an event called "Western Sunday" had been planned in conjunction with the annual Fort Smith Rodeo. The reasons and details of the event -- when mentioned in the Session minutes -- are rather sketchy. However, there was much ado about the incident, as Session members were quite concerned over pictures to be taken by the magazine photographers, and the content of the story that would be published. It was finally agreed by the Ruling Elders that no pictures would be taken during the Sunday worship service. They could be taken before the service or after. Furthermore, all pictures and script would be edited or approved by the Session before LIFE would be allowed to print the segment about the church. There was nothing more said in the minutes as the outcome of the article -- whether LIFE writers showed up at the church, whether the story was ever printed in the magazine, or if the entire idea was abandoned! When various "older" church members were asked about the incident, no one remembered!

As was the custom, the minister reported to the Session a summary of his activities during the month. A typical report was this one taken from the minutes of July 1956. Reverend Stone reported the following: "published five issues of 'The Spire,' taught five Sunday School classes, acted as camp chaplain for the Southwest District meeting held at Mount Sequoyah for one week, attended one U.S.O. Board meeting, conducted four weddings and five funerals, assisted at the Vacation Bible School, made 103 phone calls, welcomed

four new members into the church and did one Baptism!" There was no mention of the hours spent in preparation for any of these activities.

It is little wonder that by the end of year the Session decided to reactivate the Board of Deacons consisting of 15 members. These were to serve on a rotation basis with one third of the Board retiring each year. The new Board was ordained and installed February 24, 1957. In a special meeting of the Session on March 27th, the Faith and Life committee made a report concerning the hiring of a Director of Christian Education. After hearing her qualifications, the Session voted to hire Miss Ann Duval to fill the position of Director of Christian Education and Music. She was to begin work in this capacity in August with a monthly salary of \$350! In April Mrs. Aubrey Yates was appointed by the Board of National Missions to become Parish Visitor.

Speaking of women ... the July 28th issue of "The Spire" carried an interesting item. Anne Morrow Lindbergh had written a book entitled, "Gift from the Sea." "The Spire" recommended the book, saying, "It is required reading for every sensible woman ..."

As the summer turned to autumn, Arkansas was faced with a sticky situation which in deed required the involvement of some very sensible people. The Supreme Court had ordered all schools to become desegregated as soon as possible. Although the Little Rock School Board had taken some steps in this direction, this court order had not been carried out in as timely of a manner as some of the Little Rock citizens would have liked. On September 4, 1957, a showdown was forced at Central High School. On that date the National Guard barred nine black students from entering Central High. Although they were finally admitted to school on September 21st, they were forced to leave again because of the widespread fear that violence would erupt. It was not until September 24th, protected by Federal Troops ordered in by Eisenhower, that the students were able to return to Central High and be admitted under the court ordered desegregation policy.

A few days later, on October 4th, the Soviet Union launched its satellite, Sputnik 1, which disintegrated January 4th, 1958. The United States celebrated on December 17th at Cape Canaveral, Florida, with the first successful launching of an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile. On January 3rd, Cape Canaveral was selected by the Army as its site to launch the first U.S. satellite into orbit. The United States and the Soviet Union had entered the space age -- and Central Presbyterian Church had entered its Seventieth year!

April 29, 1958, was the day of Central's Birthday celebration! This gala event had been given special planning. Members of the congregation had ribbons pinned on them which denoted how many years they had been members of the church. As a special presentation, Central members enjoyed a play entitled "This is Your Life." As the story of Central was read from the church's infancy to the growth it had experienced up until 1958, members pantomimed various events and programs in which the church had been involved over the last seven decades.

Co-incidentally, it was during this year that Central also received a name change. In 1958, our denomination had a historic merger. The United Presbyterian Church and The

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) became one church. As a result of the new united denomination, Elders Anderson and Carmack made the motion that the recommendation of the Faith and Life Committee be carried out and that the church's name be changed to Central United Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.).

Another change at Central had to do with the Deacons. It was decided that the job duties of this board needed to be specifically outlined by the Session. As a result of the discussion regarding this issue, the Deacons were given the responsibilities in the church of ushering, evangelism and fellowship.

During the year there were some improvements made to the new sanctuary. In September of 1956, Mrs. Bob Henderson Nelson presented the church with a gift which was given in the name of Dr. Hefner as a memorial to his late wife Zelma. The Session accepted her request to give the church the chimes in the spire which were installed by the Norton Chime Company. A later addition to the sanctuary was the installation of a central air conditioning system in May of 1958.

In the fall of 1958 came an unexpected event which is still vividly remembered by many at Central. Sunday, October 5th was celebrated around the world as World Wide Communion Sunday. Dr. Hefner was assisting in the Communion Service that Sunday. During the service he had a heart attack and died before the congregation realized what happened. The remainder of the church services was suspended.

Homecomings were always happy occasions! One special homecoming remembered by some was that of Ethelyn Cathey, daughter of Dr. and Mrs. Charles Cathey. The Session had given its permission for her wedding to take place in the sanctuary at Central Presbyterian, "at no charge for the use of the sanctuary and church facilities"! The wedding took place on May 25, 1957, a little more than a year before her father's death on November 28, 1958.

In some ways it could be said that Central was a very progressive church. During the racial conflict in Little Rock, members of the Session had been "upset" by the press coverage the local newspapers had given the incident. Although the minutes are not specific as to what comments made by the press they took objection to, the Session did at least become involved enough in the issue to write a letter to the editor expressing its displeasure!

As far back as the 1930s, the Session had decided not to allow women to sit on the Session as elders. However, in 1958, long before the women's liberation movement, Central Presbyterian had a woman as an elder on the Session! Mrs. Oscar Fentress had been elected to fill the unexpired term of her husband, who had died. Evidently her presence made a good impression, for there has been women elders at Central for many years since!

As the 50s came to a close, Reverend Stone tendered his resignation on December 13, 1959, so that he could accept a call from the First Presbyterian Church at Joplin,

Missouri. Again Central was looking for a new pastor and a building campaign was underway.

By the late 50s another war was simmering overseas in a remote country called Vietnam. Early traces of radical racial changes had been seen in the 50s but would escalate during the next decade. Social changes brought on a new trend toward higher education and the rights of the individual were on the horizon

## Chapter VII - Social Upheavals: 1960-1969

The first day of the new decade was a Friday, and many sports fans in Fort Smith spent New Year's Day watching Washington pound Wisconsin in the Rose Bowl on KFSA-TV Channel 5. Later they settled down to watch "Rawhide" and "The Bell Telephone Hour". The next day, the Arkansas Razorbacks beat Georgia Tech, 14-7, in the 1960 Gator Bowl.

Many members of Central Presbyterian Church and other people in the city were concerned about the immediate changes the new decade would bring. A Pastor Search Committee was seeking a replacement for Reverend Robert Stone, who after five years at Central, accepted a call at the First Presbyterian Church in Joplin, Missouri.

Fort Smith businessmen were wondering about the economic future of the city. Fort Chaffee had been closed again six months earlier, and the owners of small businesses were feeling the loss of more than 10,000 military personnel from the area. Some people were wary of the base's "yo-yo" effect on the local economy --

booming when Chaffee was open and depressing when it was closed. Chamber of Commerce Manager Paul Latture and a task force of leading citizens had launched a concerted effort to bring industry to Fort Smith. Within weeks, their efforts paid off. In February 1960, Borg-Warner Manufacturing of Ohio announced plans to build a huge Norge refrigerator plant on the south side of the city. About ten days later, officials of the Mead Container Company talked of building a plant in Fort Smith.

As Winter melted into Spring of 1960, the Pastor Selection Committee at Central could find no really qualified candidates. But there were plenty of candidates in the race for United States President. With Eisenhower completing two terms, his vice-president, Richard Nixon, was the only logical choice to be the top man on the GOP ticket. But the Democratic race was another story. Massachusetts Senator John Kennedy had tossed his hat into the ring in January. During the early days, he had plenty of opposition from Senators Lyndon Johnson of Texas, Hubert Humphrey of Minnesota, Stuart Symington of Missouri, and even two-time party nominee loser Adlai Stevenson of Illinois. But after Kennedy's victory in the New Hampshire primary, his bandwagon began to pick up speed and the other hopefuls fell by the wayside.

Something else was happening in early 1960. It all began in a variety store in Greensboro, North Carolina, when "black people" filled lunch counter seats previously reserved for whites. The "sit-in" worked, and spread quickly to other restaurants and stores throughout Dixie.

In early May, hopes for a Summit Conference between Eisenhower and Soviet Premier Khrushchev were dashed when a U-2 plane piloted by Francis Gary Powers was shot down over Russia. The

United States later admitted the plane was spying on missile sites.

Two weeks later, the Central search committee said Dr. Laverne Ross of Shawnee, Oklahoma, had been invited to preach June 5th. A reception was held that afternoon, and the following day Dr. Ross was approved by the congregation. His installation as pastor was set for September 11th. Shortly after the arrival of Dr. Ross, the Session adopted a new manual of Session organization. Subject to the authority of the United Presbyterian Church of the U.S.A., the manual set forth standing committees of Worship, Christian Education, and House and Grounds. The Session also adopted a motion that the Central facilities would not be offered to profit organizations.

Sports and politics continued to make headlines. In early October, the underdog Pittsburgh Pirates downed the New York Yankees to win the world series, when the Pirate's Bill Mazeroski homered in the bottom of the ninth to win the final seventh game, 10-9. Kennedy and Nixon appeared in four live televised presidential debates in their neck-and-neck race for the presidency. The election itself was just as close, with Kennedy the winner by a little over 100,000 votes out of nearly 70-million cast. Nixon decided not to contest the outcome and the 43-year-old Kennedy -- the first Catholic ever to be elected -- made plans for his inauguration as the nation's second youngest president. Telling the the country to "...ask not what your country can do for you," Kennedy launched into his "New Frontier" in January of 1961, amid a backdrop of increased racial tensions and sit-ins around the country. Civil rights leaders were hopeful the new president and a favorable Congress would enact legislation to help the status of black Americans.

On April 12th, Major Yuri Gagarin of the Soviet Union became the first space traveler when he was launched into orbit from Siberia. Three days later, it was confirmed that an attempted invasion by Cuban exiles at the "Bay of Pigs" in Cuba had failed. And on April 18th, the church Session decided to spend \$2,500 to paint the exterior of the Parish House and the Sanctuary. Later the Ruling Elders decided to borrow \$4,000 from Merchants National Bank for the painting and the making of minor repairs to church property.

Russian space fears turned to cheers on May 6, 1961, when Commander Alan Shepard, Jr., of the United States was rocketed into space from Cape Canaveral, Florida. Fort Smith residents joined those around the nation in watching his safe return to the Atlantic via live television. Astronaut Virgil Grissom made a similar Mercury flight in mid-July.

It seems the military dominated the news headlines in the latter part of 1961. When East Germany closed the border to West Berlin in August, tensions between East and West escalated overnight. With the erection of the "Berlin Wall", many reserve military units in the United States were called into active service as a precautionary measure. That put the "yo-yo" effect at Fort Chaffee into high gear again, as the base was again activated for reserve training. The nation waited to see what President Kennedy would do. And President Kennedy waited to see what the Russians would do. Thus started an era of mutual distrust between the two super-power nations.

On September 13th, Arkansas Congressman James Trimle introduced legislation that would establish the site of the original fort near downtown Fort Smith as a National Historic Site, pending transfer of the land to federal control. The legislation was another step in the long effort by Fort Smith civic leaders to recognize the historical importance of the area. Renovation of the site had begun in the late 1959's when a special community task force had torn down the shacks that had become an eyesore known as Coke Hill. Then in December of 1958, Lieutenant Clyde Dollar, a Fort Smith soldier stationed at Fort Chaffee, had begun his own excavations in the Belle Pointe area for the foundations of the original fort. With word of the possible legislation approval, an effort was spurred to acquire deeds to the Belle Pointe Property.

In early October, Central Presbyterian Church Elders hired Mrs. Jessie Ferguson, whose primary duties were church visitation and evangelism work -- geared for securing new church members from the soldiers and their families living near Fort Chaffee.

On October 28th, President Kennedy flew to eastern Oklahoma for a conference with Senator Robert Kerr at his mountaintop home near Poteau. While there, the President dedicated the Talihina Scenic Drive that winds along the mountaintops between Arkansas and Oklahoma. When Aor Force One landed in Fort Smith, Kennedy was formally presented with the title to all the lands around the old fort ruins by Mayor Robert Brooksher. The act, though largely symbolic, assured the city of federal assistance on the restoration project, which would prove to be a major tourist attraction in Fort Smith.

Also in 1961, the local school board authorized construction of a new high school in Fort Smith. The federal census of 1960 had listed the city's population just nine people short of 53,000. Most of the growth was to the south and east where the new high school was needed. Construction of the new facility on South Gary continued throughout 1962.

According to the Session reports, the membership at Central had grown during the first two years of the decade, too. The church rolls on December 31, 1961, showed 622 members, a record membership. Music Director Warren Edmiston had told the Ruling Elders he would quit on December 31st. But the Session, after having a replacement change her mind in early January, requested that Edmiston stay on. He did for a while, but finally stepped down in May and was replaced by Herman Cook.

In late August of 1962, about the time the United States spacecraft Mariner was launched for a December flyby of the planet Venus, the Ruling Elders attended special meeting to discuss the possibility of buying the Berry home adjacent to the sanctuary. A special committee was instructed to negotiate for the Berry home with a bid, "...not to exceed \$50,000."

Shortly after Labor Day of 1962, a rash of church burnings took place in Georgia, apparently to discourage black voter registration rallies. The burnings drew criticism across the land, but it made many church officials realize how vulnerable their sanctuaries were in the heat of racial tensions. Accordingly on September 12th, the elders at Central decided to adopt a policy of, quoting the Session notes, "...seating any colored

person who desires to enter our church as quietly as possible by some person in the church who has acknowledged they would not be opposed to this arrangement."

Rioting accelerated in neighboring Mississippi two weeks later as James Meredith -- a black-- tried to become the first of his race to enter the University at Oxford. Governor Ross Barnett tried to block Meredith's entrance to the school. After several attempts were met by hostile crowds, Meredith was accompanied by federal marshalls and succeeded in enrolling.

Two days later, astronaut Wally Schirra orbited the earth six times and landed safely in the Pacific. But most headlines and news broadcasts concerned the growing crisis with Cuba. President Kennedy told the nation in mid-October he had ordered a blockade of the island until the Soviets agreed to remove offensive missiles. Ten days later, the Russian missiles were gone.

Meanwhile, the Session continued negotiations to buy the Berry property as Thanksgiving gave way to Christmas. Fort Smith sports fans joined those across Arkansas in rooting for the Razorback football team of 1962. Coach Frank Broyles' crew lost only to Texas enroute to a Sugar Bowl date with the undefeated Mississippi. But on January 1, 1963, the Rebs prevailed, 17-13.

Elder R. K. Rodgers told the Session February 3rd his committee recommended purchase of the Berry property for \$52,500. The special committee further recommended a \$70,000 loan to buy the property, blend it with existing church property, and consolidate other loans. The congregation approved the proposal on February 19th.

As Central neared its 75th anniversary in April, 1963, Elder Rodgers and his wife made another purchase for the church -- this time, a gift. They presented the congregation with two octaves of Schulmerich Handbells. And they further stipulated they would give twenty-five dollars per month to the Choir Director to lead the new Central bell choir (A third octave of the expensive bells was added in 1965, again a donation from Mr. and Mrs. Rodgers). Also in the Spring of 1963, the Session approved dividing up the rooms in the Berry House for various offices. A few weeks later, Mrs. W. L. Hutcheson donated living room furniture for the home in memory of her husband who died on March 23rd.

As Pastor Ross and other church workers settled into their new offices during the summer months, newspapers, radio, and television broadcasts were filled with important stories at home and abroad. Pope John XXIII died in June, the Russians launched the first woman space traveler, and the U.S. Supreme Court struck down state and local regulations regarding prayer in the schools.

In July, the United States, Russia, and Britain all agreed to a limited nuclear test-ban treaty, signed amid the worst scandal to rock the government of Prime Minister Harold Macmillan. Toward the end of August, nearly a quarter of a million persons flocked to the Washington Monument in the nation's capital for a gigantic rally on human rights.

Focal point of the gathering was a now-famous address, "I Have a Dream," by the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., of Atlanta.

Several hundred Fort SMith youngsters of junior high age entered the city's new school -- Southside -- built to accomodate the growth in the south part of the city. But it would be the Spring of 1966 before Southside Senior High would have a graduating class.

Those youngsters had been in their new classrooms a little over two months in November, when word flashed through schools, offices and homes in Fort Smith that President Kennedy had been shot during a trip to Dallas. Radios and televisions clicked on -- and stayed on for four days -- to follow details of Kennedy's death, the swearing in of Lyndon Johnsn as President, the capture of his alledged assailant Lee Harvey Oswald, his subsequent murder in the basement of the Dallas police station, and Kennedy's somber Washington funeral. It was a time most Central members, and people everywhere, would always remember what they were doing that fateful Friday afternoon in November of 1963.

Two months later -- in January -- an "explosion" rocked the United States and was felt in Fort Smith. The "fallout" lasted for many years and some say it changed the course of history. A long-haired British rock group -- the Beatles -- captured America by storm and gave a new direction to the music of the nation's young. Throughout 1964, it seemed the Beatles were everywhere.

In May, the Session adopted a policy for the chuch concerning outside groups. The approved resolution stated: "We believe that any endorsement of any kind bearing the name of Central Church must first come from this body. This is not to be construed as a protest for those working in the worthy causes of the commmunity, doing there what can be done better than through the church. We have reason to be proud of the fine work a large number of our people are engaged in across community life. May there be more of it as a Christian witness, but let us do it as unto God as individuals Christians."

Protesters of racial inequality scored a victory in July of 1964, when President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. It came just ten days after three civil rights workers were reported missing in Mississippi. Their bodies were discovered a few weeks later.

But the incident that would fuel sometimes violent protests for another decade took place in early August when the North Vietnamese attacked American destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin on the far side of the Pacific. Pesident Johnson ordered appropriate military response, and the minor "police action" soon became the controversial war in Vietnam.

The fall of 1964 turned out to be one of the driest in Fort Smith history. Only a trace of rain fell during the entire month of October, and the meandering Arkansas River resembled a tiny creekbed. On October 4th, Dr. Ross suprised the Central congregation when he said he wanted to terminate his pastoral relationship with the church. Two weeks later, a nominating committee was chosen to begin a search for his successor.

Church-going sports fans had other things to think about. The St. Louis Cardinals won the World Series from the New York Yankees; Frank Broyles' Razorbacks were piling up football victories and climbing each week in the national ratings. On October 17th, they beat rivalled Texas in Austin, 14-13, and fans were talking Cotton Bowl.

About two weeks before Lyndon Johnson won a second term as president by overwhelming Republican candidate Barry Goldwater in November, the President's wife made a trip to Fort Smith. "Lady Bird", known for her beautification projects, presented city officials with the formal declaration of the establishment of the old fort as a National Historic Site, and inclusion within the National Park System.

As the Christmas season of 1964 approached, even the most lukewarm of Arkansas Razorback fans could hardly wait for New Year's Day. The Hogs had stormed to a Southwest Conference title and the Number Two ranking in the polls. They had a perfect 10-0 season on the line, registering five straight shutouts to end the regular season! And when the proverbial dust had settled on the Cotton Bowl in Dallas New Year's night, Arkansas was -- according to most -- the best football team in the country! They had whipped a good Nebraska team 10-7, to win the bowl game and remain undefeated. But better yet, Texas had given Arkansas a tremendous boost by upsetting previously unbeaten and Number One Alabama in the Orange Bowl, 27-17.

As the cheering died away in January, Lyndon Johnson was inaugurated for another term in the White House and spoke of a "Great Society". Meanwhile, blacks were quietly organizing in Alabama for more protest marches against voting inequities. The war in Vietnam was widening, too, with stepped-up bombing raids on North Vietnam and more Americans being sent into combat.

On Sunday, February 14, 1965, Collier Porter -- the chairman of Central's New Pastor

Committee -- presented the name of Reverend Dr. Roy C. Smith of Sapulpa, Oklahoma, as a possible candidate. The motion by the congregation was unanimous. He was formally installed at services in Fort Smith on April 4th, two days after Dr. Martin Luther King proposed an economic boycott in Alabama because of interference to register black voters.

In June, Fort Chaffee was closed again, upsetting the economic balance for many smaller businesses and shops in the Fort Smith area. Since it had reopened in the late summer of 1961, many local storekeepers and owners of rental property had thrived on the presence of the military.

Nearly 40 persons were killed in late August in a suburb of Los Angeles, when racial rioting broke out in the Watts community. In early October Pope Paul VI became the first pontiff to visit the United States. He delivered a personal appeal for peace to the United Nations in New York City. This same city -- along with much of the Northeastern U.S. -- was plunged into darkness during a massive power failure the night of November 9th.

Despite the 1965 blackout in New York, Central Presbyterian Church in Fort Smith had enjoyed a good year in the black. Pledges for the 1966 budget showed a surplus of about \$1,400. The total budget for the year had been set at roughly \$47,000, with approximately \$15,000 for the Building Fund. Total church membership on January 1, 1966, was at 666, down slightly from the year before. On January 18th, the Session learned that a bequest of \$10,000 was being made available to Central from the estate of the late Louis Geren. Ruling Elders decided to put the money into a special fund that included a gift from Raymond Rebsamen. It was agreed the special account be reserved until a permanent educational structure was built.

During the spring of 1966, television viewers flipped over a "campy" version of "Batman"; the federal government was warning of the dangerous drug called LSD; and the radio stations played a hit song recorded by an Army sargeant that praised Special Forces in Vietnam -- "The Ballad of the Green Berets."

Twin domestic tragedies gathered national publicity in July and August. Richard Speck was charged with murdering eight student nurses in Chicago; three weeks later 25-year old Charles Whitman climbed a 27-story tower on the University of Texas campus in Austin and randomly opened fire on students below. Fourteen of them were killed.

News from western Arkansas was more positive. A huge portion of Interstate 40 north of Van Buren was formally opened to traffic, giving area motorists their first real taste of driving on a divided highway. Also that summer, the new Fort Smith Municipal Auditorium was completed on the site of the old downtown railroad station. And in July, the Bonneville House was formally opened as a tourist attraction in the recently-designated Belle Grove Historic District.

Central's membership as of January, 1 1967, stood at 688 members, a net gain of 22 for the year. In February, the Session announced fund-raising plans for construction of an educational building behind the sanctuary. Details were presented to the congregation on March 5th. At their meeting later that month, the Ruling Elders announced that about \$22,000 had been raised toward construction of the new facility, and the drive would continue.

On Sunday, January 15, 1967, only diehard football fans across the country were caught up in the "championship" football game between the Green Bay Packers of the established National Football League, and the Oakland Raiders of the challenging American Football League. The spacious Rose Bowl in Pasadena was only half filled with fans who watched the Packers easily win the first of what would be called "Super Bowls." Two weeks later, tragedy struck at Cape Kennedy in Florida, when a fire broke out on the Apollo I spacecraft undergoing simulated space tests while on the ground. Mercury astronaut Virgil Grissom, first "spacewalker" Edward White, and fellow astronaut Roger Chaffee all died in the unexplained fire.

In late march of 1967, Fort Smith voters decided to change their old "commision" type of government. They supported a plan favoring directors to represent each of the city's four

wards. Three "at-large" directors would complete the new "board", which was to vote on decisions proposed by a professional city administrator. Jack Freeze was elected mayor, and would serve in that capacity for almost 16 years.

The year 1967 was not a good one on the national scene, nor for the thousands of United States troops now fighting in Vietnam. And racial tensions were no better, approximately 30 people were killed and 1,500 injured when riots broke out in Newark, New Jersey, in mid-July. A week later, the ugly scenes were repeated in Detroit, where more than 40 people died and 2,000 were injured. It took thousands of federal paratroopers and National Guardsmen to quell nearly a week of rioting in each city.

The "battle" at Central Presbyterian Church in August was not against rioters, but bugs. House and Grounds chairman Henry Williams told the Session that Westminster House was infested with termites. He was instructed to "...have them exterminated in the most efficient manner possible."

The older and more conservative elements in the country had mixed feelings toward students returning to college campuses in the fall of 1967. Many young people in Fort Smith and elsewhere were emulating the life-style popularized by "Hippies" in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco and the hills of Berkeley across the Bay. Both were focal points of the "Flower Power" movement sweeping the nation. Espousing a mixture of drugs, sex, self-serving religion and contempt for the authority, the "long-hairs" or "Jesus freaks", as they were called, came to symbolize the anti-war movement. Opposition to the war in Vietnam reached a new peak in October, when about 35,000 "doves" and anti-war protesters gathered for a "peace march" in Washington. Between 600 and 700 of the demonstrators were arrested.

A little earlier in the month, the St. Louis Cardinals won their second World Series in three years by beating the Boston Red Sox. Led by Carl Yastrezmski, the Sox had won the American League pennant on the last day of the season.

Thoughts turned to medicine in December of 1967, when the South African physician

Dr. Christian Barnard performed the first successful human heart transplant on a patient who lived less than three weeks. The experiment made church members realize that human bionics were becoming a reality.

A report to the Central Ruling Elders in mid-January of 1968 showed the church membership as of the first of the year stood at 701 members, an all-time high. Later that month, an entire nation and a crowd of 50,000 in Houston's Astrodome watched the Cougar's Elvin Hayes outduel U.C.L.A.'s Lew Alcindor, 71-69, and end the Bruin's record winning streak. And a show called "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In" began on Monday nights.

Most of the news focused on the 1968 presidential race. Senator Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota blasted Johnson's stand on the Vietnam War and surprised the pollsters in early

primaries. Former vice-president Richard Nixon jumped into the GOP race in February, about the same time the nation learned of a stepped-up Viet Cong effort called the "Tet Offensive". Peggy Fleming stirred American patriotism when she won gold medals at the Winter Olympics in Grenoble, France. And young actor Dustin Hoffman bridged the generation gap in a satirical movie called "The Graduate."

President Lyndon Johnson startled the nation in late March by announcing he would not seek a second term. So Bobby Kennedy got in the race, and it proved the start of a long and violent spring and summer. Civil Rights leader Martin Luther King, Jr., was shot down outside a motel in Memphis in early April and the black reaction erupted into riots in several cities. Two months later, Kennedy himself was assassinated as he left a Los Angeles hotel following his victory in the California Democratic primary. Both sides of a divided nation wanted to know what happened and why.

On Friday, April 19, 1968, it had been raining most of the day in the Fort Smith area. About three o'clock that afternoon a funnel cloud dipped from the leaden skies and whirled through the center of nearby Greenwood. When it was over, fourteen people had been killed and nearly 300 others injured. Property damage to the town of 2,000 was estimated at about one and a half million dollars, and there was a 200-yard wide swath of rubble through the whole town square.

Violence and destruction did not seem to stop. Richard Nixon completed his political comeback by capturing the presidential nomination at the Republican convention in Miami in July, while war demonstrators marched outside the hall. A month later, it was even uglier on the streets of Chicago as police and demonstrators battled in view of television cameras. Inside the Democrat's convention hall, delegates nearly battled in the aisles before finally selecting Vice President Hubert Humphrey as the party nominee.

But there were happenings in 1968 that did not involve violence. At Central, a Building Planning Committee organized in the spring was formulating plans for a new Church Education Building; some members were wondering if the financial goals could be reached. In late September, Denny McLain stunned the baseball world by winning his 30th game of the year --

the first pitcher to do so in thirty years. But it was Detroit Tiger teammate Mickey Lolich who broke the hearts of St. Louis Cardinal fans by pitching the Tigers to a World Series title. The year closed on a positive note. President-elect Richard Nixon pledged to end the war in Vietnam. On Christmas Eve, a spellbound national television audience eavesdropped as astronauts Borman, Lovell, and Anders made ten orbits around the moon and became the first humans to view its dark side. It was an exciting prelude of things to come in space.

The membership of Central Presbyterian Church reached a new high on January 1, 1969, standing at 717, a net gain of sixteen for the previous year. Three weeks later, sports fans reeled in the New York Jets' startling upset of the Baltimore Colts in the third Super Bowl, 16-7. Brash Jets quarterback Joe Namath had predicted the victory, and elevated

the rival American Football League to parity that would ensure the popularity of Super Bowls for years to come. A week later, the Session decided to call a special Congregational meeting to discuss funding for a new educational building. The meeting was set for late March.

Earlier in the month, the city of Fort Smith officially joined other communities in the development

of post-war suburban shopping patterns with the formal opening of Phoenix Village Mall. Scores of spectators, local dignitaries, and store owners watched Mayor Jack Freeze snip the ribbon to allow shoppers to begin walking around the huge mall.

Anticipation was growing across the country for man's first walk on the moon. Three astronauts tested the lunar module on the Apollo Nine flight in March of 1969. In May, Thomas Stafford and Eugene Cernan dropped to within ten miles of the moon's surface as they flew in the tiny module. That same month, Central's Building Planning Committee presented an agreement to the church's Trustees to sign a contract with the architect for preliminary plans for the new Education Building to be built behind the sanctuary.

Nationwide, educational institutions were still having trouble with student demonstrators. Unrest fermented at most major college campuses, but it erupted into violence at Berkeley, at the University of Wisconsin, and also in the east at Cornell. Protesters had learned how to "disrupt" various events and gain attention for their own causes. Fear of possible disruption affected many churches, too. At a May meeting, the Session approved a proposal that said, in effect, "...if any attempt is made to disrupt services, the minister, Dr. Smith, would immediately pronounce the Benediction and the Postlude."

By mid-July of 1969, all eyes were on the skies. Sunday night, July 20th, astronaut Neil Armstrong climbed down the ladder of the spaceship Eagle and stepped in the soft dust of the lunar surface. Television cameras followed his tentative steps on the foreign soil and the entire world cheered his progress. Music was cheered for three days on a farm in upstate New York in August, when close to a million rock-and-rollers partied at Woodstock, an event that became the watershed for future giant music concerts.

A month earlier, a car driven by Senator Ted Kennedy of Massachusetts, the younger brother of former president John Kennedy, went off a low-water bridge on Cape Cod. The accident killed passenger Mary Jo Kopechne, a Kennedy secretary. Because of the scandal created by the incident, Kennedy finally went on national television ten days later to explain "what really happened at Chappaquiddick."

It was hard for anyone to figure out why actress Sharon Tate and several of her friends were massacred in their Los Angeles home. Police later arrested "hypnotic hippie" Charles Manson, the leader of a group of young drifters charged with the apparent "cult" killing. His trial made headlines in December.

The fall of 1969 was not kind to Chicago Cubs fans. Streaking toward their first pennant in twenty-five years, they were derailed by the "Miracle Mets" in the last two weeks of the season. The surprising New York Mets went on to capture the World Series from the favored Baltimore Orioles in much the same fashion that the Jets beat the Baltimore Colts in January. Arkansas Razorback fans were "sooeying" wildly in 1969, as the Hogs rolled through most of the season undefeated. But they still trailed Texas in both the conference standings and the national polls. It all came down to a December 6th climax in Fayetteville, witnessed by visiting President Nixon and nationwide television. Arkansas jumped to the lead, but the Longhorns came from behind in the final minutes to win, 15-14, and capture football's "Shootout of the Century."

The economic outlook for western Arkansas brightened considerably in mid-December with the completion and formal dedication of the Lock and Dam 13 near Barling. It was a vital link in the long-awaited Kerr-McClellan Navigation System to control the Arkansas River, and it boosted Fort Smith's importance as an inland port to handle river commerce predicted for the future.

As the tumultuous decade of the Sixties drew to a close, Central members were heartened with the news that a debt had been retired. Dr. Smith was told by the Session that the \$70,000 borrowed in 1961 to buy and refurbish the nearby Berry property had been paid off. The congregation seemed now ready to focus its attention on the construction of an education building, and the challenge of a new decade.