

The History of the Park Hill church of Christ



“Standing in the Gap” then and now



Introductory Information —



As is normal, we humans either allow, or cause, our mind's to store certain memories that are quickly recalled when prompted by other recollections. In regard to churches, the building is often as strong a memory as are the members, preachers, and events that occurred in the building. Especially is that so when a church has remained in one location for a lengthy period of time.

The photo above and the post card at right depict the building that is most often thought of in association with the name Park Hill church of Christ in Fort Smith, Arkansas.

Certainly in the physical sense this building located at the corner of Jenny Lind Road and South "S" Street, in Fort Smith, was the landmark of the congregation for almost 60 years.



The photo above was taken in 2009 and the post card shown at right was printed in 1953. While the perspective is different you can see that the exterior of the building has changed very little over that 56 year interval.

I feel certain these pictures will stir the memory of any who have worshipped in this building, however, what is depicted in these photos is just a building. Regardless of its distinctiveness it is still physical, there is so much more that sets this church apart from many and it has nothing to do with the building nor anything else physical. It is the spiritual side that has remained strong through the decades, and the love for the truth that has kept this church firmly rooted in scriptural matters.

But, the building is unique and if you should drive by the corner of Jenny Lind and South "S" Street you will see the building still standing and recognizable even though it has undergone some major changes since it was sold in 2010. It now serves as a place of worship for a group of Vietnamese Buddhists.

In the pages that follow my intent is to present the history of this congregation from both the physical aspect as well as the spiritual. Like so many other congregations, Park Hill's history has not always seen "clear sailing." In addition to the many "good times" with their resultant periods of rejoicing, there have also been the "low times" where troubles, disagreements, and even splits have been dealt with. Throughout its history the faith and determination of the membership has allowed Park Hill to work its way through the difficulties and remain strong!

Yes, of course those low times hurt, but it is not my purpose or intent to point fingers or attempt to place blame. I hope I can objectively record the history accurately including both the highs and lows, from its very roots to present day, where we find ourselves closing in on our one Hundredth anniversary, and still “standing in the gap!”

So that you may know my credentials for writing this history, let me spend a short bit of time introducing myself. My name is Ron Roberts, and at the time I started this project in December of 2016, I still serve as one of the elders with the Park Hill church of Christ.

The current elders are shown in this photograph and are (from left to right) Carl Dolan, Ron Roberts, and Joe Turner.



I first attended Park Hill in the summer of 1955, at the age of 15, having just moved to Fort Smith with my parents in May of that year. I was not a Christian at that time and my parents did not place membership immediately. As a matter of fact, until we moved to Fort Smith we didn’t “go to church” much. We moved here from Neosho, Missouri where we lived for a little longer than a year. I don’t recall a single time that we went to church during that year. Prior to that we lived three years in Frederick, Oklahoma. We lived one block from the church of Christ building there, and we may have attended the services three or four times while we were there.

I remember a conversation my mom and dad had when we were moving to Fort Smith. They mutually decided we had been missing services for too long and that once here, we would become regular in our attendance. I knew all of the “Bible Stories,” because I spent most, if not all, of every summer with my grandparents on my mother’s side of the family. When you lived with them... you went to church! To tell you the truth, I was not all that happy that we were going to start going to church again.

We found four churches of Christ in Fort Smith when we arrived. We visited Dodson Avenue two or three times, but they didn’t have “Sunday School,” so we tried another. We attended May Avenue and they didn’t have Sunday school either. We only visited there twice. We visited Midland Boulevard and they did have Sunday school. In fact they pretty much conducted services the way we were used to seeing down in southwest Oklahoma. But my dad said we were going to try the other church before making up our minds, so we visited Park Hill for the first time probably sometime in July or August of 1955. All of us liked the services, they were big — had about 500 people — and the preacher was an Indian. (American Indian) He talked fast and he was able to keep my interest. I thin we went back to Midland Boulevard a time or two, but finally settled at Park Hill.

My association with Park Hill, however, has been continuous since that time in 1955

even though my actual presence here has been interrupted on two occasions. The first occasion was for about eight years from late 1960 to November of 1968 while I served in the US Air Force.

The second absence, this one for slightly over ten years from the summer of 1973 until June 3, 1984 during which I was a member of the Southside church of Christ, here in the city of Fort Smith.

Prior to my serving as an elder with the Park Hill congregation, I served as an elder with the Southside church of Christ, and prior to that I served as a deacon with the Park Hill church of Christ for about two years, until we left in 1973.



I said my association with Park Hill has been “continuous since 1955.” I believe I can say that because during those two periods of absence I still maintained reasonably close contact with the Park Hill congregation. Throughout the first period I was away, my father-in-law, Johnny Mathis, was serving as an elder for the Park Hill church of Christ. So, even then we (my wife, children, and I) were aware of the happenings there.

In addition to that, during the second period of absence, while we were worshipping with the Southside congregation, not only was my father-in-law an elder at Park Hill, but my own father was serving in that capacity as well. The photo at left was taken in 1980, and is of my father-in-law, Johnny Mathis on the left, and my dad, Dave Roberts, the elders at Park Hill at that time. Both are now deceased.

[Note: When we moved back to Fort Smith in 1968, I began working for Johnny as an electronic technician, in the business he owned, and that we (Jo Anne and I) bought from him in 1980, at which time Johnny continuing to work for us until his retirement.

The black and white photo at the right was taken after Sunday morning services sometime in September of 1959. The center part of that photo is enlarged and shown on the next page.

In this photograph the lady just to right of center is my wife Jo Anne and I am the guy with the black hair slightly behind her. We were talking to Mary Schoeppe who is holding the hand of her young daughter, Mary Jean. I believe I was holding a piece of hard candy in my hand that I was going to give Mary Jean, because I used to carry individual wrapped hard candy in my pocket for the plentiful kids we had back then.





When this photograph was taken in 1959, the membership of the Park Hill congregation numbered somewhere between 500 and 550 members and most of them showed up on Sunday mornings as we typically had 450 to 475 of those members in attendance each Sunday morning. It was not uncommon to have 15 to 20, maybe more, visitors as well.

I was baptized into Christ in this building in July of 1956 and Jo Anne and I were married in this building on February 2, 1959.

In September of 1959 Jo Anne was eighteen years old (her birthday is September 1st) and I was nineteen (my birthday is in June). At the time of our wedding back in February, Jo Anne was 17 and I was 18.

Purpose for writing:

My purpose for writing this history is two-fold: First, to provide, as accurately as I am able, a chronological account of the events for posterity's sake, and second, to fulfill a promise I made to Johnny Mathis that I would complete the historical record that he started.

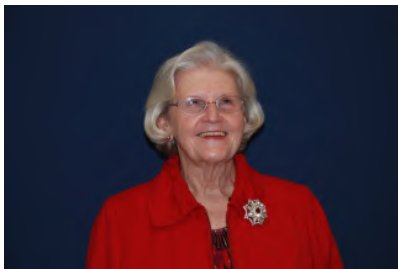
As I was compiling my notes, reading through some of the literature that Johnny had collected, as well as the stuff I had in my possession, I realized that for clarity's sake there would need to be some references made out of chronological order, because they influenced other events that occurred during the time being covered. When this happens my plan is to explain those events (as, and if, needed) but to mention those events again in their proper sequence so the chronology will be kept intact.

As mentioned earlier, my first visit to Park Hill church of Christ was in the summer of 1955 as a 15 year old kid, so obviously I must rely on information obtained through the years from several sources for the accounting of those occasions prior to my coming. The major portion of the information after 1955, though, comes primarily from my own memories and by talking with my dad or Johnny.

It is my intention to concentrate on writing Park Hill's history and not to focus on my own activities. But the truth of the matter is, a very large part of my life is connected to the Park Hill church. From the time I was 17 years old I was teaching the pre-teens on Sunday evening, and at 18 I was married teaching one of the younger teen age classes. I have been active in the church ever since — most of it at Park Hill, but also

at the Mississippi City church of Christ and the Southside church of Christ here in Fort Smith.

As an electronic technician I helped install and maintain the Public Address system, the video equipment and pretty much all of the wiring in every building I have worshipped in, and this building is no exception. I have crawled through every duct and passage, under the floor and through the attic, running wires and cables, therefore I am very familiar with the building on Jenny Lind. Therefore, because of my connection with Park Hill, certain parts of this discourse will appear (as it may here) as if I am recording my own personal history. I will make every effort to keep that to a minimum.



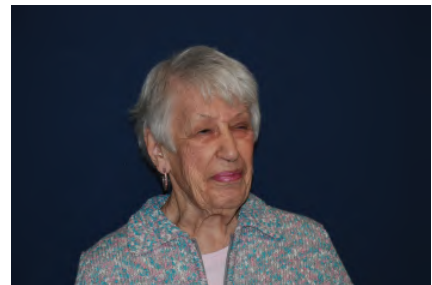
Anne in the red jacket.

My memory, is no longer the "steel trap" it once was, and as has been demonstrated lately, is certainly not infallible. Therefore, if you notice something that seems wrong, let me know so we can get it right. In addition to my own memory, I have also called upon the memory of Jo Anne (Mathis) Roberts, my wife for over 57 years (as of this writing), who began attending the services at Park Hill in 1945 when she was four years old. That is Jo

Jo Anne can't remember everything about those early years, either, but her memory is better than mine (she tells me that a lot). Jo Anne does vividly remember the remodeled and enlarged Stucco building in which she attended classes and worship services. That building was still in use in early 1951 until it was dismantled to make room for construction of the new auditorium.

In addition to Jo Anne's and my own recollections, I have gathered information from newspaper clippings and the personal memories from a few "long time" members of Park Hill, including Billie Sue (Price) Atkins and Johnny Mathis, Jo Anne's dad.

Billie Sue, shown at right, was only five days old when her mother first carried her into the Park Hill church building. She married Carl Atkins who later served Park Hill as a deacon until his death. Billie Sue was at ser-



vices this past Sunday morning, as she is every time her health allows her to be, and I typically spent some time pestering her.



Johnny Mathis

Billie Sue, or "Susie" as some of us call her, is a faithful member of this congregation and a joy to know. She has a good sense of humor which I test often.

Johnny Mathis, shown at left, my wife Jo Anne's dad, has, except for a short three month period spent at Southside

(on the south side of Fort Smith), faithfully worshipped with the Park Hill congregation from the summer of 1945 until his death in December of 1994, and as already stated, for many of those years Johnny served the Park Hill congregation as an elder.

Not long before his death Johnny wrote a short article he titled ***"A Short Chronicle of the Park Hill Church of Christ,"*** from information he had obtained over the years he worshipped at Park Hill. I have that article and in fact, quote from it several times in this account. Remarkably, in regard to the details gleaned from Johnny and Billie Sue, as well as other material, I have found only a single instance where either of their accounts differ from what I found to be the truth. Together, they gave a very good picture of Park Hill's early years. I also rely on information contained in published documents, membership directories, bulletins published by both the Park Hill congregation and the Southside congregation (of which I was a member for awhile), from financial records and notes taken at business meetings, and also from what is now called the West-Ark church of Christ. I have been in contact with several preachers who worked with Park Hill, and members of other congregations who once were members of Park Hill. I have also gleaned information from the websites of several churches that have provided material.

I was also provided with some written material collected by Winton Gayle Carson in regard to the very early history of the Dodson Avenue church of Christ from which the Park Hill congregation was started. That material provided some much appreciated background that goes back even further than that of Johnny and Susie, and I drew strongly from it for the period before 1918.

From January of 1919 until July of 2010, when we sold the building and property on Jenny Lind, the Park Hill church of Christ was an established presence on the corner of Jenny Lind road and South "S" Street, here in Fort Smith Arkansas. However, during those 90 odd years several different buildings were constructed, revised, remodeled, torn down or moved, to accommodate the needs of the membership.

The first thirty or forty years of Park Hill's history contains a story of such amazing growth and unity that it, in itself, is a testament to the love for the truth and dedication of the membership! Since that time, though, the church has also suffered through more than one period of division, split and loss. Fortunately, in the 1980's there was a merging back together of Park Hill and Southside, one of the early groups who left on peaceful terms.

As with any church, the membership changes over the years with Christians moving away and others moving into town; the adding of new converts and the loss of those that have gone back into the world; new babies being born and elderly that have died. But essentially we are the same church, still standing on first century truths and principles, working hard to spread the gospel in the Fort Smith area and beyond, for almost a century now! Thinking about that reminds me of a story I once heard about an old woodsman that was busy hewing trees with an sharp axe when a stranger came by:

The stranger stopped and watched the old woodsman deftly chopping into a large tree trunk. Being intrigued the stranger commented on the woodsman using an axe rather than a chainsaw to fell the trees.

The old woodsman proudly held up his axe and commented that he was proud to be using the very same axe his father had used, as well as his father before him. The old woodsman, with a gleam in his eye, proudly stated that he, himself, had used the axe for almost 40 years after receiving it from his father.

Hearing the old woodsman's story, the stranger asked, "How do you account for your axe looking so new if it is in fact that old?" "Well," the old woodsman replied, "this here axe has had five new heads and twelve new handles during all those years, but it is still the very same axe my grandfather used."

It is my prayer, in the years that might lie ahead, that Park Hill will always take up the gauntlet and stand for the truth! If that should come to pass and you happen to be here, it is my desire that you annotate these notes and continue this history for posterity's sake.



Tony Ripley, one of Park Hill's former preachers once wrote:

"The Park Hill church of Christ is a living testimony of endurance. It has stood the test of time, and is no stranger to the battle scars and fatigue that comes from standing in the gap for the truth!"

Certainly, I can attest to that. During the more than half a century I have been here we certainly have seen periods of disappointment and discouragement, but we have also seen many other days of great joy and happiness.

The Beginning — (Period Covered: Late 1800's until early 1919)

The specific Park Hill history doesn't begin until the Fall of 1918, but events a hundred years prior to that serves to set the stage by providing background that will allow us to understand its beginning. Fort Smith, the army outpost, was established at the eastern edge of "Indian Territory," on the Arkansas River in the American frontier, on Christmas day of 1817. On that date sixty-four men of the Rifle Regiment built temporary shelters and began working on the permanent fort.

The permanent fort was built on a prominent bluff overlooking the confluence of the

Poteau and Arkansas Rivers called Belle Point. It was tasked with the keeping of the peace between the Cherokee and Osage tribes in Indian Territory, just across the river.

By 1839 a significant community had grown just east of the army fort and in the late 1850's that community grew into a bustling town taking its name from the Army post shown in this 1859 lithograph.



It is my understanding that in the early 1860's more than one group of people had established meeting houses and were meeting for religious services in and around Fort Smith.

Among those several groups was a group that called themselves, the "First Christian Church." For the most part they were united in their stand for the truth, and were able to worship peacefully together, with the only point of contention among the members being the use of instrumental music in their worship services. As it was reported, *"Some were agin' it, and others were fer it."*

A part of the material provided me by Winton Gayle Carson was a written document purported to be a report by "Marie Stuart and some other folks," who were a part of that First Christian Church. According to that report, *"... in 1911 a number of people left the First Christian Church at Fort Smith and established what was believed to be the very first congregation of the Church of Christ in Fort Smith."*

That same account also records that on the Thanksgiving Day in November of 1911, *"with a great amount of free donated labor,"* a building was erected *"in one day, to the point where they were able to have a service in the building that first evening."*

It is further stated in that report that *"people from all over town and from several walks of life came together to participate in the construction of the building."* It was surprising to learn, from that report, that a clause had been put in the deed to that building prohibiting instrumental music from ever being used in that building... And even more surprising, the members of that first congregation of the church of Christ in Fort Smith demanded the clause be left in the deed, even to the point of refusing a sizeable monetary donation from the First Christian Church if they would take the clause out of the deed! The building was located at 1122 South 17th Street, on the corner of South 17th Street and Dodson Avenue, and the congregation began to call themselves the Dodson Avenue church of Christ.

For the first few years after breaking away from the First Christian Church, the Dodson Avenue church of Christ was in harmony and used curtains to partition the building into individual classrooms for bible study. On one particular Sunday, however, there was a

low number in attendance and the leaders of the congregation decided not to split up into classes that day, but to have only one class. Most of the membership liked that arrangement so well that they continued, from that day, having only the one class. It appears from the record at that time, that the class arrangement that was simply a matter of preference. Eventually however, a new preacher came to work with the Dodson Avenue Church and taught that dividing the membership into bible classes, went against the biblical teaching of "unity of the church," and began to preach, as doctrine, the necessity of not dividing the church into bible classes.

A short note provided by Winton Gayle Carson provides a bit of additional information regarding the Dodson Avenue church of Christ:

"For many years the Dodson Avenue congregation, although never a 'One Cup' congregation, did give thanks for the Fruit of the Vine while it was contained in one large pitcher. It was then divided into two glasses for distribution to the membership refilling the glasses from the pitcher as necessary. That practice continued until 1942, at which time they began having individual communion cups."

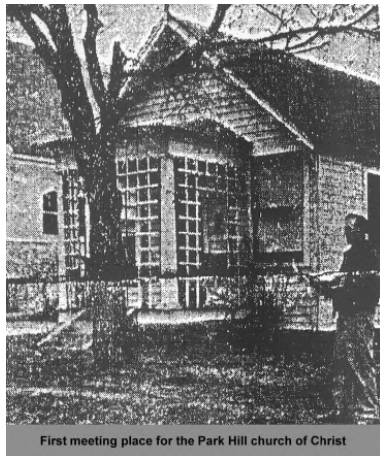
By 1915 there was a significant number of families at the Dodson Avenue church with children. Some of those parents did not believe their children were benefiting from the "one class" bible study, and wanted to return to separate bible classes suited for the children. They stressed that the children were being taught at home, but the parents felt the children were missing an excellent opportunity for learning while sitting in the auditorium listening to material presented at an adult level.

This issue was openly, and sometimes heatedly, discussed, but the elders of the Dodson Avenue church were adamantly against separate classes. It was this yearning for their children to have bible classes suited to their children's ages, with competent teachers, that served as the seed that germinated, and later sprouted into the Park Hill church of Christ.

The Early Years — (Period Covered: 1918 through 1936)

In an article published in the "Southwest American" newspaper early in 1943 relating the story of Park Hill's origin, it was reported:

"The Park Hill church of Christ was organized in the Fall of 1918 by a group of members from the Dodson Avenue church of Christ. The first meeting place for the newly formed church was a small store building on Jenny Lind road between South R and S streets. The new congregation was 'set in order' on January 19, 1919 with evangelist W.T. Kidwell appointing the elders and deacons."



First meeting place for the Park Hill church of Christ

I'm not sure this photograph appeared in that particular newspaper article (although it did appear in a later article), but notice that the new auditorium is shown standing behind (to the left of) the store building, just across the alley, in this photo. That fact dates this photo as having been taken in 1953 or early 1954. The new auditorium was not completed until January 1953, and the small store building was demolished in early 1954. The man in the photograph is Elmer Bridges, a builder and one of the elders in 1954, and I suspect he is looking at the blue prints for the new preacher's home that is going to be built to the right of this photo and, perhaps, considering what must be done about this small store building.

That 1943 newspaper article included nineteen names of the people who made up the original group. That list included:

Mr. and Mrs. S. A. Lynch
Mr. and Mrs. Elmer Bridges
Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Wilson
Mr. and Mrs. G. A. Howell
R. A. Towery
Mrs. C. R. Berkley

Mr. and Mrs. J. G. Maner
Mr. and Mrs. Jack Lockridge
Mr. and Mrs. W. B. Woods
Mr. Brent Baker
Mrs. R. A. Withers
Miss Thelma Howell

While these are the names listed in the newspaper article as the "Charter Members", of the Park Hill church of Christ, we must acknowledge that the purpose behind these folks leaving the Dodson Avenue church was they felt their children were not getting the teaching they needed from the single class situation at Dodson Avenue. We must therefore conclude that there were several children in at least some of those families. As a matter of fact, Johnny Mathis wrote in his short chronicle:

"It was in the late fall of 1918, that a group of about 19 members and their children left the Dodson Avenue church of Christ to form the Park Hill congregation."

"Internal strife existed at Dodson Avenue, at that time. Some of that strife was due, in part, to several of the members wanting to have bible classes with teachers and material presented in such a way as to be suited for all age groups. Up until that time, you see, all met together for bible study AND the worship."

As was said in the introduction, my family visited the Dodson Avenue church of Christ when we first moved to Fort Smith in late May of 1955 looking for a place to worship. At that time all members, regardless of age, met together in the auditorium for the bible class. After the class period was over, there was a short break during which

members moved around and visited with each other, then the worship service would begin. To the best of my knowledge, they continued that practice until the congregation disbanded.

Johnny continues his narrative:

"These nineteen members with their children did not have much money, but they had a common goal to worship their Savior in harmony and peace, the way they felt the bible said to do it. So, they found a white frame building about midway between South "R" street and South "S" street on Jenny Lind Road and rented that building for \$5.00 per month."

So, the first building used as a meeting place for the Park Hill church of Christ was that white frame store building shown on the previous page. This building was physically located on the north side of the alley that ran between South "R" and South "S" Streets, and divided the block in half. The building faced Jenny Lind Road. I don't know if the front porch had the lattice, or if even the porch existed in 1918. A lot of change could have occurred during the 35 years before its destruction.



The first preacher that officially came to work with Park Hill was Will Slater, pictured here. I believe this photo was taken in 1957, and if I am not mistaken, the tribute that follows was written by Gussie Lambert, a former member of the Park Hill church of Christ:

"William Washington Slater, was born February 2, 1885 near Ozark, Arkansas in Logan county. Before he began to preach he was a gospel song writer. When Will was five years old, his family moved to Indian Territory (Oklahoma) settling near Sallisaw on a farm. I believe his formal education was only to the 5th grade, but he spent much time reading. He was baptized into Christ in 1901, and became interested in music. He would ride an old mule 15 miles to take voice lessons to become a better song leader. Beginning in 1906, he taught many singing schools in 20 different states. He decided to become a preacher and every day he would study the Bible. Will Slater became associated with several gospel preachers such as E. M. Borden, J. Will Henley, J. B. Nelson, and J. D. Tant.

In 1912, while at a gospel meeting in Atwood, OK, in which Will led the singing and J. Will Henley was preaching, Henley preached a sermon on the home of the soul. Will took notes and after the service went to his room and before going to bed, wrote the words for the song, "Home of the Soul." Will also wrote "Walking Alone at Eve," which some say was his best.

In 1913, Will began to make a few talks in the country schoolhouse and then went to Coal Hill, Arkansas, and preached "part time" for the church there. In 1915 he went to Pourn, Oklahoma, near Muskogee, to do his first full-time lo-

cal work. In late 1916, he went to Muskogee, Oklahoma to take over the local work for the church there. Will moved to Fort Smith, Arkansas, in 1918, to Preach for the Park Hill church of Christ, then to Beaumont, Texas, and then to Irving, Texas. Will died on August 22, 1959 in Hot Springs, Arkansas."

I think she may have meant Porum, Oklahoma, which is not far from Muskogee and located in Muskogee County. I don't know when Bro. Slater quit preaching at Park Hill, nor do I know when he moved away from Fort Smith. I have a copy of the 1927 church directory that lists Mr. and Mrs. Will Slater as members of the Park Hill church.

Interestingly: In that 1927 directory, beside Will's name is the designation: "Minister." However, on the inside cover of that directory, where the elders, deacons and preacher is listed, the "Minister" is listed as W. E. Moore. I do not know if both men were serving as ministers at Park Hill at that time or if Moore was the minister and Bro. Slater lived here and attended Park Hill when he was not preaching at other churches in the area, but that is an interesting thing.

In addition to the small store building that was being rented for \$5.00 per month and used as the first meeting house of the Park Hill church of Christ, there was also a small house just across the alley to the south, that was vacant. There is some speculation that the house across the alley from the rented store building was also rented by Park Hill in addition to the small store building, but I can not authenticate that.

I know for a certainty, however, that the house in question — the one across the alley from the small store building — was built on a portion of the lot that was purchased by Park Hill in early 1919, and at that time the house was used for extra classrooms as well as the preacher's house at different times. More about that later.

Material I have specifically lists Will Slater as the first preacher that worked with Park Hill, "coming to work with Park Hill in the Autumn of 1918" and states that he continued until "sometime in 1919." The month of his departure is not recorded.



My first thought after reading that another preacher, W. T. Kidwell, shown here, came and appointed the elders and deacons in January of 1919, was whether Will Slater was still the regular preacher at that time. At this point, I believe he was.

After researching W. T. Kidwell, I learned that he was a highly regarded church of Christ preacher in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He was from Tennessee, and as I understand it, he taught H. Leo Boles and converted him.

I can not be certain of the reason Kidwell came to install the elders and deacons, but a long time member of Park Hill suggested the reason might be that the congregation wanted to be "officially recognized" as a true church of Christ and thought his coming to install the first men to serve as shepherds and deacons might

insure that fact. That, of course is a possibility, but I can't say for a certainty that was the reason for his coming.

I wish I had more information in regard to this era, but it doesn't seem to exist. I know without question that Johnny Mathis had a packet of printed material as well as a large number of handwritten notes in the late 1980's that I feel sure he relied on when he wrote his short article in 1994. But those records have disappeared. They were not in the material his second wife turned over to us at his death, nor were they a part of the estate when it was later settled. I continue to search for public records hoping to find further information, and if you know of an event that should be included, please let me know.

From looking at the early part of the list of preachers I have, it appears the names may not be listed in chronological order. There are nine names listed as working with the Park Hill church between the "autumn of 1918" and January of 1934 when Fanning Yater Tant came. I have a journal that was begun in February of 1951. In that journal each member of the congregation at that time is listed. The address of each member is listed as well as the date they were baptized, who baptized them, the date they placed membership at Park Hill and from where they came. The date of marriage and death is also recorded. It appears this journal was intended to be an on-going thing and updated regularly, but for whatever reason, the last entry was in 1956.

However, the journal does list the date of the baptism of each member and who baptized them. Using that record I think I have been able to determine the sequence of those first 10 preachers. There could be some mistakes, but as best I can tell the sequence is:

Will Slater	— baptized members in 1921, 1924, and 1925
Paul Kimbrell	— did not baptize anyone in the journal
W. E. Moore	— did not baptize anyone in the journal, but is listed in 1927 Directory as the minister
Glen Green	— did not baptize anyone in the journal
James Laird	— baptized someone in 1927 and 1931 also listed as an elder in 1931
J. Scott Greer	— baptized someone in 1929
Cecil N. Wright	— baptized someone in 1948, but is listed as the "Minister" in the 1931 directory
Tillman B. Pope	— baptized someone in 1933
Lee P. Mansfield	— did not baptize anyone in the journal, but is listed As leaving 1928
Fanning Yater Tant	— baptized someone in 1933, 1934, 1935, 1936, and 1949 and it is documented he was preacher from January 1934 until 1937

Therefore there are only two, Glen Green and Paul Kimbrel that we truly know nothing about. The years that are unknown are 1923, 1926 and 1928. I would think those two were here in one or two of the unknown years. But nothing is certain except for the

ones that are documented. Beginning in 1934 reasonably accurate records were kept and preserved so that the remainder of the list is not in question.

Park Hill was blessed with a great, but unforeseen growth in membership in the early years and it became difficult to provide adequate space for everyone to meet together.



As a result, over the next 35 year span, there will be a lot of property buying, demolition, shifting of space, quick construction and remodeling, amid the planning for the ultimate goal of obtaining a large enough meeting house to meet the demands of the membership. It was all done within the confines of less than one square block, with the exception of one instance that will be covered later.

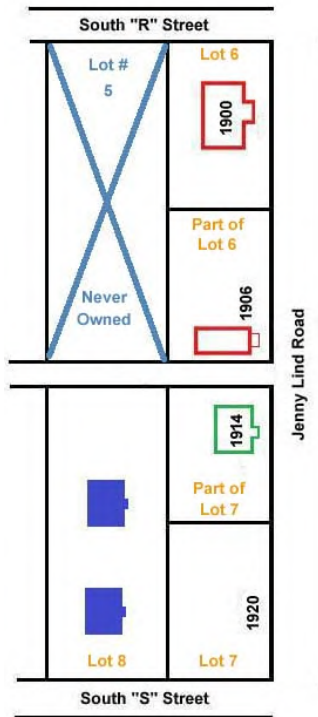
I thought perhaps a couple of drawings would help in keeping straight the various properties that were purchased and how they were used. If possible, keep these drawings in mind and it will help in understanding the several changes that were occurring as various lots were bought, sold, or built on.

The adjacent lots that provided ample parking spaces, Lots 9, 10, 11, and 12, were not purchased until a later time — in fact I was the agent that purchased Lot 12 in 1987. From 1918 through the 1950's the parking was on the street "where you could find it," but many of the congregation lived within a few blocks of the building and walked to services. This drawing is of the city block where everything took place. I will repeat this drawing on the next page and continue the discussion.

As a matter of fact, as far as the building itself is concerned it was all in Lots 7 & 8. This drawing is one square block in what was then called the "Park Hill district" of Fort Smith, and was bordered by Jenny Lind Avenue on the east, Bluff Avenue on the west, South "R" Street on the north, and South "S" Street on the south.

Initially, with only few exceptions, all North/South oriented streets were called "Avenues" and all East/West oriented streets were called "Streets." But between 1920 and 1925 the city changed all "East-West" oriented streets from names to letters in alphabetical order from the North/South division. I show both in this drawing. Lots 1 through 5 shown on this drawing, on the South "R" side of the block remain pretty much the same as they were, and Park Hill never owned any of those five lots.

However all of the rest of the lots shown on this drawing, Lots 6 through 12, were owned by Park Hill and changed a great deal! The city block was divided into 12 lots. Eight of those lots measure 50 feet wide by 140 feet deep, but the four corner lots are wider by about 10 feet to compensate for the sidewalk easement. Lot 7, the block shown in Red, is the first piece of property that will be purchased by the Park Hill church of Christ.



This second drawing is an enlarged view of Lots 5 through 8 from the first drawing. Park Hill never owned Lots 1 thru 5, so they will not be discussed.

In 1918 Lot 6, had two buildings on it, a residence on the corner assigned 1900 Jenny Lind Road, and a store building next to the alley assigned 1906 Jenny Lind Road. The store building was small, having about 600 square feet of floor space. This was the first meeting house for the Park Hill church of Christ!

Since they will come into the history later, I will also mention Lots 7 and 8 and the structures on them.

There was a residence located at the rear of Lot 7, with the address of 1914 Jenny Lind Road, just across the alley from the store building. This will later become the "Preacher's house." The southernmost part of Lot 7 is labeled in this drawing as 1920 and formed the corner of Jenny Lind and South "S" Street, but there was no building present on that part of the lot.

Just west of Lot 7 is Lot 8 shown with two blue houses, one in front of the other. I do not know the exact orientation, size or placement of these two houses on that lot, but both Jo Anne and Harold Turner attended classes in those houses and remembers them at least "similar" to the way they are shown in this drawing. They will become classrooms after the first new building is constructed.

Chronologically, it is early in December of 1918. The Park Hill church is meeting in the 600 square foot former store building, which they are renting for \$5.00 per month, at 1906 Jenny Lind Road, and is comprised of about 25 or 30 members.

City records for year 1919 list the house just across the alley from the store building as "1914" Jenny Lind, and also lists the property labeled "1920" in the drawing as being "empty - no structure."

I have been able to determine that the house on the corner of South "R" Street and Jenny Lind Road, shown in the drawing as 1900 Jenny Lind Road, was owned by the J. W. Dickson family, whom Susie Atkins remembers.

By January of 1919 the congregation felt they had men qualified to fill the offices of elder and deacon. Johnny writes:

"In order to be in harmony with the bible teaching in regard to the organization of the church, they felt those men needed to be appointed, so in January of 1919 the first elders and deacons were appointed by the evangelist, W. T.

Kidwell. Those appointed to the office of elder were J. G. Maner, G. A. Howell and W. B. Brooks. S. A. Lynch was appointed as treasurer and D. J. Lockridge and Elmer Bridges were appointed to the office of deacon."



As discussed earlier, Will Slater was the located preacher at Park Hill at this time just beginning his career. However, the evangelist W. T. Kidwell, pictured at left, came and ***"set the congregation in order."*** As far as I know Kidwell was never a preacher "located" in Fort Smith.

I found that the term ***"setting a church in order"*** was a common term at the turn of the 20th century. It simply meant installing men to serve as the overseers (elders) and servants (deacons) as the Apostle Paul did when he went back through those churches he had established as recorded in the book of Acts.

It should be noted in regard to those men selected to be the first elders and deacons of the Park Hill church of Christ: They were not "novices." All but one were named among the original 19 adults that left Dodson Avenue to form Park Hill. W. B. Brooks' name was not mentioned as being one of the original nineteen, so he must have come shortly after. He obviously was known and respected in order to be considered as an elder.

Johnny mentioned in his chronicle that the Park Hill congregation had "grown to almost fifty members by the Spring of 1919. Without knowing how many children were among the original nineteen adult members that left the Dodson Avenue church to form this congregation, we can't for a certainty surmise the congregation had doubled in size in such a short period of time, but I suspect that would not be far from the truth. Certainly, fifty members crowded into a 600 square foot building, with classrooms, would be crowded. While "being crowded" is often looked at as a good thing for churches, there was definitely the need of a larger facility — especially if they continued to grow at this rate.

Johnny records:

"They were able to buy the empty lot on the corner of Jenny Lind Road and South "S" street for a total price of four hundred fifty dollars (\$450.00) and plans were under way to erect a new meeting house!"

This is where we encounter the only difference I have found in Johnny's record of Park Hill's history and what must have really happened. Knowing Johnny as I did, I'm sure he recorded what he thought to be the truth, but since he was not present to witness this part of the history "first hand," he was relying on what he had been told.

The facts — as born out by the abstracts and bill's of sale — prove that more than just the "empty lot" on the corner of Jenny Lind and South "S" Street was purchased! As a

matter of fact, the purchase consisted of the whole corner lot of Jenny Lind and South "S" street shown as Lot 7 (colored red in the drawing on the page 15) which included the house at 1914 Jenny Lind as well!

The entire Lot 7 belonged to Mr. and Mrs. D. J. Lockridge, and on February 27, 1919 that property was sold to the "Trustee's of the Park Hill church of Christ" for the total sum of \$400.00! The deed was filed and recorded on March 13, 1919 at 8:10 AM in the Sebastian County courthouse, Fort Smith, Arkansas. As Paul Harvey would often say, now let me tell you "the rest of the story:"

You may recognize the name of the owners of that property, Mr. and Mrs. D.J. Lockridge. If you have closely followed this history, you will recognize them as being named in the original nineteen adults who left Dodson Avenue to form Park Hill. You may also remember that D. J. (Jack) Lockridge was one of the two men appointed to the office of deacon on January 19, 1919 by W. T. Kidwell when he "set the church in order."

My guess is Jack Lockridge, being one of the first deacons of the Park Hill church of Christ, did not make a profit on that land, but probably sold it to the church for what he had previously paid for it — or maybe even less. Of course, that is pure supposition on my part.



The congregation immediately made plans to build a new building. As can be seen in this architects "rendering" of that building, it would sit directly on the corner of Jenny Lind and South "S" streets. You can see the sidewalks and curbs in this rendering.

You would literally step out of the door, go down three steps and be on the sidewalk. Rather than have wood siding, the building was to covered with "Stucco," and has always been referred to as the "Stucco Building." It took about 7 months to build the stucco building and it was being used by the end of year 1919.

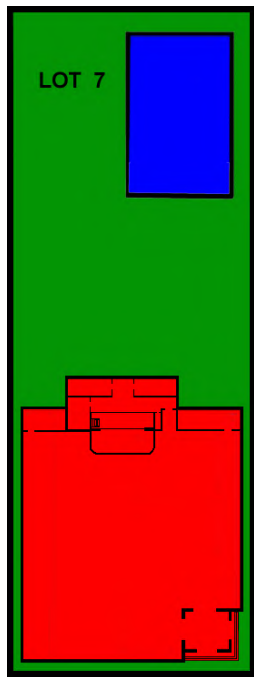
The address the city gave the building was 1924 Jenny Lind. The empty lot had been given the address of 1920 Jenny Lind. I don't know why, but this is only one of the several addresses given to Park Hill through the years.

Many thanks to Warren Berkley for sending this photograph of the front corner of the Stucco building. (This photo was actually taken in 1939, but the front corner looked the same.)

For those of you who don't know, Warren and his sister, Paula were born while their parents worshipped at Park Hill. Both of them attended Park



Hill almost from birth until they left for college. Northum Berkely, their dad, served as one of the deacons until his death in the late 1950's.



In the Fall of 1919, after the Stucco building was complete, the corner of Jenny Lind Road and South "S" Street looked similar to the drawing at left. The blue rectangle represents the preacher's house and the red figure represents the new Stucco building.

Most, but not all preachers who came to work with the Park Hill church until 1952 would live in the preacher's house behind the stucco building. The new Stucco Building would comfortably seat 150 people.

Essentially, the stucco building was one big room, but the north end had a partition to separate the baptistery, restrooms and dressing room from the auditorium. The baptistery was entered from the rear and a window in the wall behind the pulpit would allow viewing from the auditorium. There was a classroom on each side of the pulpit area for toddlers and pre-school.

Curtains were used to divide the east side (right side of the drawing) into classrooms. Some affirm the small store building across the alley was still being rented for classrooms, but I can't verify that. Later, once Lot 8 was purchased, there were two houses on that lot that were used for classrooms so that the curtains were no longer needed.

I have drawn the baptistery, restrooms and dressing room behind the pulpit area, but I'm not sure it is correct. Jo Anne says it is close but not exact. The pews are not shown in the drawing because of differing opinions on the layout.

In the 1920's our country was beginning to recover from the first World War, and must soon suffer through the "Great Depression". Those two events affected people in a host of different ways. But also during that period most people had a strong desire to help those who were "in need." It certainly was something a Christian should do!

Understandably, folks didn't have a lot during these periods, so they relied on each other much more than we do now. Back then, it was a common thing on holidays for people to gather for picnics at the parks that might last all day and into the night, as they enjoyed the company of others. They also would quickly "pitch in" to help each other when a family was in need. I'm sure you have heard of "Barn raisings", "House buildings" and other such similar events when people joyfully helped their neighbors without compensation, knowing that if they ever needed help it would come from the neighbors. That was the way it was in our country then - you helped people who needed help!

That feeling was naturally, much stronger with regard to members of the church! It

was not uncommon, on Sundays, that people packed a picnic basket full of food for "the dinner on the ground" that followed the Sunday church services. Newer church buildings were being built with kitchens so the members could have "pot luck" dinners in the building after the service. Sometimes after the meal, they had an afternoon singing, then another lesson before going home early, to do the daily chores. It was the way of life and they gave no thought to it. Park Hill was no exception.

When it came to benevolence, churches were the natural place to ask for help. (They still are, and many are helped, but in our modern era that is being abused to the point where it is hard to know whether one is truly needy or whether it is a "scam" to get money without having to work for it. Things were different back then.)

In 1926 a Mrs. W. T. Bush was made aware of two homeless children in the area, and brought them to James E. Laird, the preacher for the Park Hill church of Christ at that time. Bro. Laird advised that it would be far better for the children if they were kept in a private home. He suggested they stay with Mrs. Bush in her home, if she had room, and he would get as much help as he could.

Mrs. Bush agreed, and when Bro. Laird told some of the members of the congregation of the need, many helped support this effort on an individual basis. When several other children needed a place to stay, and Mrs. Bush could not provide for that number, a house was rented across South "S" street from the church building for a short period of time. Then, in late 1926 or very early 1927 a larger house was rented on the corner of South "R" street and Jenny Lind Road and became known as the "Arkansas Christian Home".

For ten years, from 1926 until 1936, the "Arkansas Christian Home" was fully supported on an individual basis by members of Park Hill. It's oversight and control was by the men who served as elders of the Park Hill church of Christ. No outside funds were solicited, or needed, because the individual members were contributing more than what was needed to care for, clothe and feed the children.

In the Park Hill membership directory for 1927 there are fifteen members shown with the address of 1822 Jenny Lind Road, which was the corner of Jenny Lind Road and South "R" Street, the location of the "Arkansas Christian Home" in 1927.

In that directory two sisters-in-law, a Mrs. Jesse Burns and a Mrs. Jeannetta Burns was listed as living at that address, so I suppose they served as the "house mothers" or whatever term was used back then. The thirteen children residing there included a boy and two girls from the Burns family (perhaps the children of one or both of the two house mothers), two girls and a boy from the Clark family, a boy and a girl from the Davis family, a boy and a girl from the Higginbotham family, a girl from the Ryan family, and two boys from the Van Horn family.

Just because they are listed in the membership directory, we should not assume all (or any) of them were baptized believers. They were, however, all attending services and

considered to be members, the same as children today, who have not been baptized, are still counted as part of the membership.

The Park Hill elders at that time, C. B. Billingsley and Elmer Bridges, believed it to be a good work, because the children had no other place to live and needed to be taken care of. But the elders also believed that this support should be kept separate from the church treasury. Therefore, a box was placed in the foyer of the building for individuals who wanted to help. I remember seeing that box right next to the front door of the new auditorium when we first visited Park Hill in 1955.



I do not know how many children lived there, but in later years the space was getting tight. Sometime during 1936 the former Harding College campus in Morrilton, Arkansas (shown at left) became available and the home was moved there. I have found nothing describing the arrangements, but with that move the name was changed from the "Arkansas Christian Home" to the "Southern Christian Home."

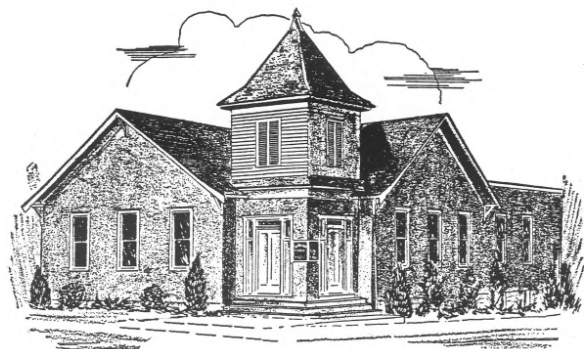
Once the move was complete, other churches of Christ began to send money and soon the Southern Christian Home became a "brotherhood project" rather than fully supported by individuals. Having become what the elders at Park Hill were trying to avoid — a church sponsored organization — the Park Hill elders severed all official association with the home. Some members still wanted to help, so the box remained in the foyer until 1957 when a total severance from even the appearance of cooperation was made.

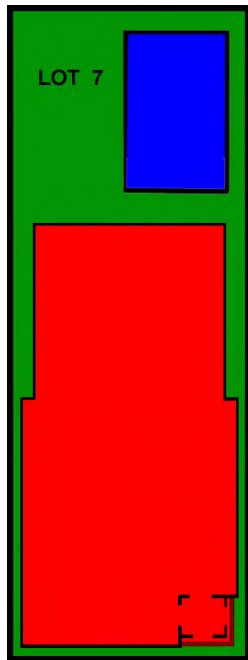
Back to the chronology...

Throughout the 1920's Park Hill continued its rapid growth, and by 1929 they were feeling the need to enlarge the Stucco building to accommodate the increasing membership.

A basement was dug directly behind the stucco building which would extend close to the preacher's house, and several rooms were added above that basement including a stairway.

The drawing at right shows the new addition added to the north (right side of the drawing) side of the building.





On the left is a drawing showing the “footprint” of the Stucco Building after it was enlarged, and how it all fit onto the lot. Again, the red figure is the Stucco building with the extension reaching almost to the small preacher’s house shown in blue. I do not know how the interior changed, or what the actual floor plan might have looked like, but I am told the basement was one large room, with a kitchen in one corner.

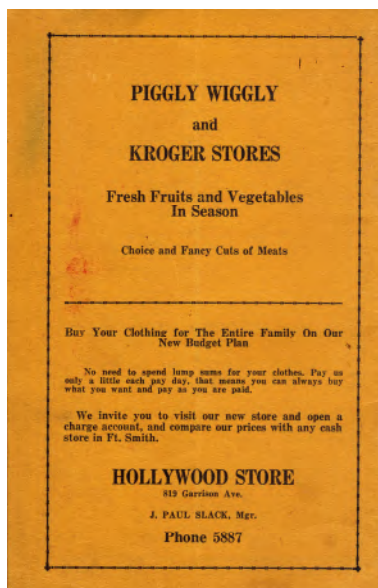
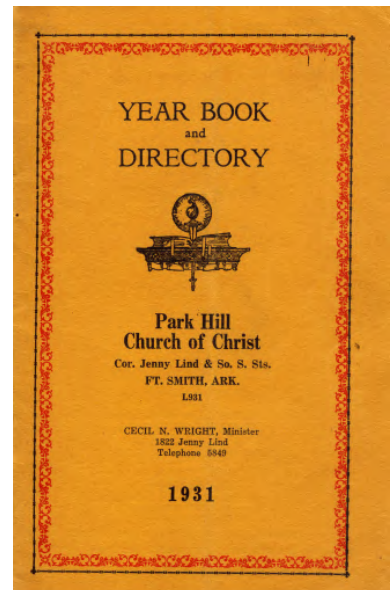
Above the basement several rooms had been added to provide needed classrooms which eliminated the need for the “curtained classrooms.” After the expansion and reconfiguration, about 250 people could be seated in the auditorium. The expansion of the stucco building was completed in 1930 or 1931. At this time the preacher’s house was vacant and could also be used for additional classrooms as needed.

On the right is the cover of the “Year Book and Directory” for 1931. The name of the minister is shown on the front cover as Cecil N. Wright. The elders of the congregation printed on the inside cover, were listed as Dr. C. B. Billingsley, Elmer Bridges, and James E. Laird.

The deacons are listed as being J. G. Manor, R. H. Turner and C. R. Burkley. (I think the spelling should be Berkley, but perhaps not.) There are five Song Directors listed in that directory: Roy Jordan, J. W. Rogers, Graden Slater, Jon W. Slater, and J. M. Weldon.

I counted 149 entries listed in that 1930 directory. I am fairly certain the James E.

Laird listed as being one of the elders in this directory was also the preacher back in 1926 when Mrs. Bush brought the two homeless children to him. I have also included (at left) a photo of the back of that 1931 directory because of the advertisements.



Between the covers of this directory are 22 pages that list the full membership, but also 44 different advertisements.

As a matter of fact, many of the directories prior to 1980 included ads. I suppose church directories were a good place for merchants to advertise. I don’t know if any “concessions” were made for those ads.

Even though there are a couple of questionable periods in regard to the sequence of the first nine preachers who came to work with Park Hill, there is little doubt about when Will Slater came: it was in the "Autumn of 1918." From other information, It is my belief that Will Slater decided to quit full time preaching to concentrate on his song writing and singing school. Billie Sue told me that Will had more than one quartet of singers and was "in demand" to hold singings. She also told me he "lived just down the street" for quite awhile. The conclusion might be that he quit full-time preaching in 1919, but continued to live here in Fort Smith for awhile, before moving to Beaumont, Texas.



I stated what I think is the correct order when I discussed the journal that was started in February of 1951. We know for a certainty that in January of 1934 Fanning Yater Tant (the picture at left) came to work with the Park Hill congregation as the new minister. What follows, in his own words, was taken from an editorial he wrote for the Gospel Guardian magazine:

"I was living in Louisville, Kentucky, having preached at the Bardstown Road congregation for five years. I was ready to move. The Park Hill congregation in Fort Smith, Arkansas was looking for a preacher and through the good offices of Foy E. Wallace Jr., an exchange of letters took place and in January of 1934, without any 'trial sermon' at all, and without even a 'get-acquainted visit,' I moved to Fort Smith.

I came because Brother Wallace commended Park Hill, and especially Dr. Billingsley, whom he described as an 'elegant Christian physician' to me. The Park Hill elders accepted me on his recommendation, and perhaps in part because they were well acquainted with my father.

At that time there were three congregations in Fort Smith — Park Hill, a non-class congregation on Dodson Avenue, and a negro congregation on the north side where the aged G. P. Bowser was the preacher. (Brother Bowser, who had taught Marshall Keeble, facetiously insisted that the G. P. of his name stood for 'Go Preach'.)

I remained at Park hill for three complete years and conducted meetings all over this area — Spiro, Charleston, Paris, Waveland, Midland, South Fort Smith, Havana, and Ratcliff, baptizing many people. And while at Park Hill we usually had two meetings per year — one being an 'exchange meeting' and one a 'paid meeting.' I exchanged meetings with Glenn L. Wallace, Guy N. Woods and Warren E. Starnes. Our 'paid' meetings were with Clarence L. Wilkerson, H. Leo Boles and Foy E. Wallace, Jr. Park Hill was at peace and was growing! Those were happy and fruitful years."

Indeed those were fruitful and happy years. When Yater Tant left the membership numbered 269 — a gain of 120 members since 1931... And the growth continued.

Expansion and Continued Growth — (Period Covered: 1937 through 1959)

At right is a 1931 city map of Fort Smith. It is too small to see much detail, but I have placed a small red dot on the map. The red arrow points to the dot. That dot is where the Park Hill church of Christ was located. The church building is located near the center of an area called "Park Hill," from which the congregation took its name. I hope this map will help you understand why the elders felt the need to reach out to the people living on the north side of Fort Smith. The major portion of the city was on the north side.



Tent Meetings had become popular in the late 1920's and 1930's. With Air conditioning still way in the future, it was more often cooler to meet outside under a tent with the sides rolled up, rather than inside a building. That may have had nothing to do with it, but for whatever reason, there was better attendance when services were held outside. Some thought it had nothing to do with temperature, but because folks didn't feel the need to be so "formal" in a tent. But it was certain that those Tent Meetings proved to be very effective in preaching and spreading the gospel. The elders, wanting to reach those living on the north side of town, had discussed a tent meeting as the best way to teach the gospel on the north side of Fort Smith.



In January of 1937 Judson Woodbridge, shown in an old newspaper photo on the left, moved to Fort Smith to take over the preaching duties at Park Hill from Yater Tant.

Woodbridge's move to Fort Smith might be the opportunity the elders had been looking for. Plans were made to hold a tent meeting, in July of 1937, on the north side of town with Woodbridge doing the preaching. They obtained a tent, located a vacant area on Midland Boulevard and received permission to "pitch" the tent there.



This photo is generic, but a similar tent was pitched at the corner of Midland Boulevard and North 28th Street, and the meeting was a success. Shortly after that tent meeting several members of Park Hill saw the need for there to be a church in that area.

I have records obtained from what is now called the West-Ark church of Christ saying that the beginning of their congregation was in 1937 when a tent meeting was held on Midland Boulevard and ten or fifteen Christians decided to rent a small house and begin a work on the north side of Fort Smith. Putting that together with what I know from the Park Hill record, it is certain the same tent meeting is discussed in both records. The group was able to rent a house on Midland Boulevard and they called themselves the Midland Boulevard church of Christ.

The record obtained from West-Ark contained a list of the original 1937 "charter members" of the Midland Boulevard church of Christ. Those names are:

Cecil and Robbie Knight
James and Rosemary Gibson
Pearl Moore
Elizabeth Nicodemus.

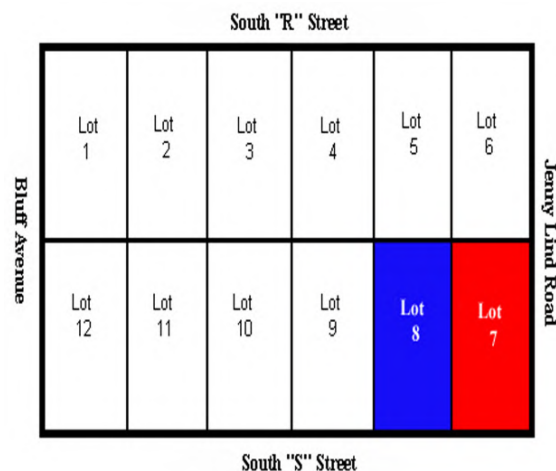
Irene Garrett
Thomas and Lorena Prock
Fanny Leemaster, and

Several of these names are familiar, and some found in the 1931 directory. I knew Robert "Bob" Gibson very well. I believe he was the son of James and Rosemary listed above. The Nicodemus family was well-known at Park Hill, and Cecil Knight preached for Park Hill earlier — it may be the same family.

A bit later I intend to compile a list all churches of Christ in Fort Smith and provide a little of their history, so I'll cover more there.

Park Hill was continuing to grow, and fortunately, back in 1930, when it had become necessary to enlarge the Stucco Building, the elders recognized if the growth were to

continue as it had been going, it would soon be necessary to have an even larger building which would require a larger plot of ground upon which to build it.



Lot 7, shown in red at left was purchased back in 1919 and the stucco building was built on the corner. During the 1930 stucco building remodeling Lot 8, shown in blue, was purchased. As you may recall from an earlier drawing, Lot 8 had two small houses on it that could be used for classrooms until the new, larger building was completed.

Combining those two lots gave Park Hill a piece of property that measured approximately 115 feet wide (since Lot 7 was a corner lot) by 140 feet deep. They felt there should be enough room to build a building large enough to seat 400 people, or more.

It seems strange to us in today's society, but back in the 1930's very little thought was given to automobile parking. The only parking that I'm aware of until Lots 6 and 9 were purchased in the early 1950's, was along the streets and in the alley. At that time the city permitted cars to parallel park on both sides of Jenny Lind Road, "R" Street, "S" Street, and Bluff Avenue. Of course, there were not as many cars back then.

By 1939, in spite of losing some more members to the newly formed Midland Boulevard congregation, the membership at Park Hill was again approaching the 250 mark, which was the "comfortable capacity" of the stucco building. The elders expected to gain even more over the next few years and realized they needed to go forward with the plan to build a building with a seating capacity of around 400 people. They also saw the need for several more classrooms and separate offices for the preacher and for the elders. Not wanting to incur a large debt, however, they decided a "building fund" should be started with the goal of raising \$18,000 before any construction would begin. Records indicate that the eldership at that time was comprised of C. B. Billingsley, Elmer Bridges, W. A. Loudermilk and L. K. Turner.

It is curious that the figure \$18,000 was arrived at. It is my suspicion that they already had talked with builders about costs — perhaps already had a floor plan in mind. At any rate, there are subtle indications of their making the decision to set aside the entire contribution from each "3rd Sunday" to go into the building fund. There are statements made in some of the bulletins: *"Don't forget, this will be the 3rd Sunday!"* and Billie Sue recalls that some members *"put a little extra in the basket on the 3rd Sunday."* There are also many entries in the financial record where the treasurer would occasionally transfer what I suspect to be surplus money after meeting the budgeted needs, into the building fund.

Judson Woodbridge stayed almost seven years. All during that time the building fund grew. During this period the two congregations, Midland Boulevard and Park Hill, remained on friendly terms and continued to support each other with members attending the other's services and gospel meetings, and individuals from both congregations continued to support of the "Arkansas Christian Home".

In regard to the fellowship between Park Hill and Midland Boulevard, which lasted into the late 1950's, Jo Anne remembers that pre-teens and teenagers, from both churches would frequently meet at the skating rink or go to parties in the homes of members, and generally "run around together."

For a certainty that was still happening when I came on the scene in May of 1955. I remember some of the parties held in the parent's homes, and they were frequent. I'm not saying a party was held every week, but it was often, and we enjoyed them! Word would be put out that "Friday night the Smith's are having a party at their house at 7:00

PM” or something similar. The typical thing was we would gather in the home of some teen’s parents, and play games, eat sandwiches, chips and "snack food".

The interesting thing I remember about those parties was that they were not for the purpose of bible study or singing, although sometimes we did sing for awhile from the “Christian Hymns” songbooks, but the parties were for teens to get together and enjoy each other’s company.

The parties were fun! In most cases two or three sets of parents would plan the thing and the adults would join in right alongside the teens in the games. The “most fun” game that was played was commonly called “Who Sir, I Sir” but the name of the game was “The Dutchman Lost His Hat.” It was played at every party! The teens drew closer to each other, and to the adults while seeing that being a Christian was not bad, but enjoyable.

It also helped us to be more active in the classrooms on Sunday's and Wednesday's because we knew and liked each other. As a matter of fact, Park Hill had a teen age class that met an hour before the Sunday Evening worship each week. There were Bible quizzes, games such as "Find the Scripture", and general bible knowledge competition between the girls and boys similar to the “Trivia” games that are popular today. Those classes were well attended, with 20 to 30 (sometimes more) teenagers in attendance. We learned a lot in those years... about what being a Christian meant, as well as what the bible taught!

But, back to the Chronology...

When Judson Woodbridge left in 1944 there was a succession of preachers that came and went. Perhaps it was the war years, or maybe for some other reason, but each stayed only a short time: Taylor Davis, Sterl Watson, and W. C. Neal. The only one I have a photograph of is Davis, shown at right, and he came in 1944 and left in 1945. Watson came in 1946 and left in 1947. Neal came in January of 1948 and left in May of 1949. Financial records indicate they were typically paid \$65.00 per week, which might sound like a paltry amount, but you must remember: The average person in the 1940’s, even into the 1950’s earned less than a dollar an hour! The federal “minimum wage” was placed at \$1.00 in 1956. So actually it was good pay, especially when you consider your house was provided.



Chronologically, we have reached the year 1946. Plans are being made to build a new edifice. If we were to view this period in the way things are done today, we might write a short paragraph that ends by saying: *“Well, the new building is finished, and it took two years to build, but look at what we have. A beautiful building that will serve us for a long time.”*

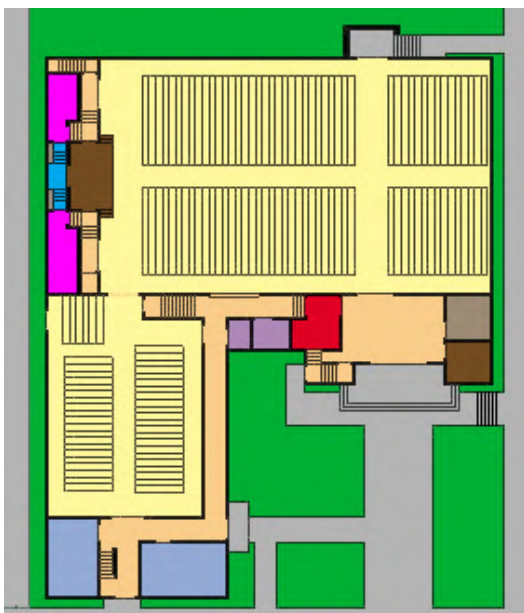
Perhaps we would not word it exactly like that, but you get the idea. But that is not the way it happened! The building shown at the top of the cover sheet for this history was built in two stages that can be difficult to understand without seeing it, because it looks normal in every way, with no indication of the planning and exactness that went into its construction.

To help you understand the building process several drawings were made, and will be seen over the next several pages. They were drawn based upon my familiarity with the building. They are not intended to be absolutely accurate. I know there are slight differences of memory on some of the minor items, such as whether or not the door was here or a foot or two further over. I took measurements, but I did not measure everything. Since 1955, first as a snoopy teen, and later as an electronic technician, I have crawled under, over, and through every nook and cranny of that building. Even under the floor where there is no basement, and through access panels that most people don't even know exist. I have even "crab crawled" through the two 100 foot long duct spaces above the main auditorium, pulling speaker wires, microphone and video cables, electrical wiring and even some plumbing. I may not have it exact, but it is close.

Johnny wrote:

"By 1947 the architect's drawings were complete, the building fund had exceeded the \$18,000.00 and they were ready to begin the new building."

The actual completion of those plans took much longer than is indicated in reading the sentence above! As a matter of fact, the planning for the new building began a few years earlier than 1947, and by the time the plans were finalized and construction began, they were changed several times. The completed building would be nothing less than a builder's marvel!

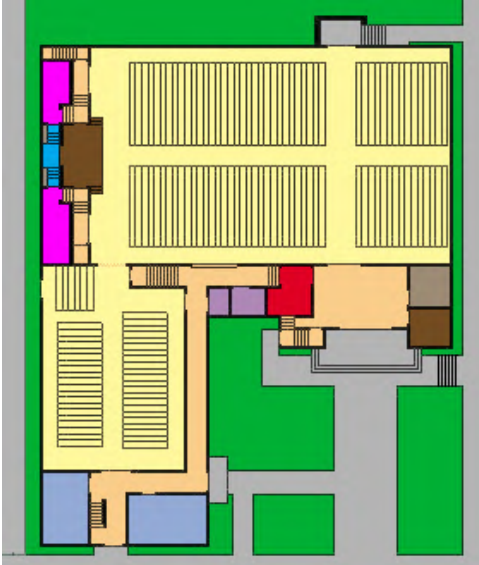


This drawing represents the building as it was when it was completed in 1953. The drawing shows the ground floor but does not show the basement or upstairs classrooms. Those will be shown later. The layout as you are looking at it uses ALL of both lots, 7 & 8.

There was a lawn behind (alley side) the large auditorium and the narrow green strip on the left side of the drawing existed in 1953. It was partly covered with a sidewalk and paved when Lot 8 was paved for parking later. The grey strip along the right side of this drawing is the sidewalk between Jenny Lind Road and the building.

This whole area is on the side of a shallow hill

(Park Hill) therefore the building is built into the slope. Looking at the pale blue room shown at the lower left of the drawing, the floor is only about 8 or 10 inches above the outside ground. But looking at the upper right corner of the drawing the north exit from the main auditorium open onto a porch that is 7 or 8 feet above the ground. To have only four or five steps up to the main entrance from the front lawn and sidewalks, the dirt from digging the basement was used to “fill” that area. To illustrate what I am saying: The front lawn is level with the sidewalk along “S” street at the bottom of the drawing but the steps up from the sidewalk near the main entrance to the building is almost a 2 foot climb to the front sidewalk.



The two bright purple rooms are elevated about 6 feet above the auditorium floor at the front of the auditorium. Those rooms are the baptistery dressing rooms - ladies on the right and men on the left. The blue area between the two purple rooms is the baptistery which is 4 feet deep, 10 feet long and 4 feet wide, poured from solid concrete. In the utility room below the baptistery is a pump with a heater that circulated the water constantly. The brown area in front of the baptistery is a raised area where

the preacher and song leader stood during services. The yellow areas with the pews drawn in are the main auditorium at the top and the small auditorium at the left center. The pews in the large auditorium were 20 feet long each and the center aisle was 4 feet wide. The two side aisles were 3 feet wide. The width of the main auditorium was 50 feet, and the length is a little over 100 feet long from the raised platform area to the rear of the building with no posts for support.

The photo at right was taken from about half-way back looking toward the front. It was taken in 2010 when we sold the building and were taking most of the pews. All the wood you see is solid Oak except for the beams and arches that support the roof. These were made from 12 inch wide, 1 inch thick Redwood planks that were formed to shape then laminated together and stained a dark oak. They were made in California and shipped to Fort Smith.

The peak of the ceiling is 38 feet from the floor at the front, and the roof is a 12 / 12 pitch — very steep! The lighting fixtures you see are wrought iron weighing about 85 pounds each and are hung 20 feet above the floor with chain. The floor is sloped for easier viewing from the pews. There is an 18 inch difference in height between front and rear of the auditorium



floor. The building was constructed in two stages separated by about two years rather than all being built all at once like most buildings are constructed!

Although the architect had finished the plans in early 1947, it was actually in 1939 when Chris Reichardt, the architect, was commissioned to draw a set of plans for the elders consideration. He presented the first set of plans to the elders a few months later but the elders were not happy with them. Over the next few years extensive modifications were made before the final plans were ready in early 1947.

Johnny told me there was a “significant amount” of “back and forth” between the elders and Mr. Reichardt. It produced a great deal of “head scratching and discussion” before the final set of plans were approved in 1947. One of the major hang-ups was the size of the overall building. Between the time the elders commissioned the plans and the plans were presented, the elders had been approached by some members wanting a slightly smaller building that would seat between 350 to 400 people, while others were wanting a much larger building — on the order of seating 700 people

After much thought and discussion it was finally decided to construct a building that would have a primary auditorium large enough to seat 600 people plus an educational section that would provide at least 10 decent sized classrooms to accommodate all age groups.

Another consideration — and one that greatly influenced the final design — was the problem of how they could construct the building without interrupting the normal weekly services.

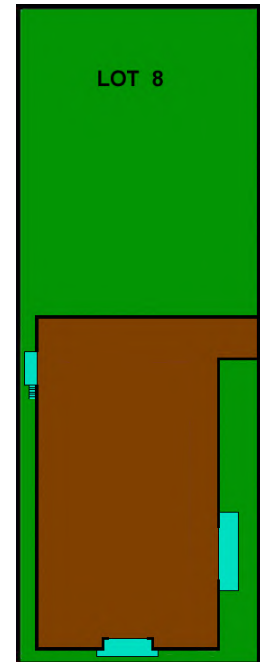
After more meetings and planning, Mr. Reichardt presented what became the final plan for the building. It included the requisite primary auditorium large enough to seat 600 people “*without their elbows touching*” plus a two-story “Educational Section” that would also include a second, smaller auditorium that would seat about 250 people with the needed classrooms above it. It also included two offices for the preacher and elders, a basement with a kitchen, and four bathrooms. The deciding factor though, was the two stories providing an additional auditorium. They were not thinking about a second story.

The educational section would be built first as a two-story “stand alone structure,” and once completed it could provide a place to hold services while the Stucco Building and the preacher’s house were removed to make room for the main auditorium to be built at a later date.

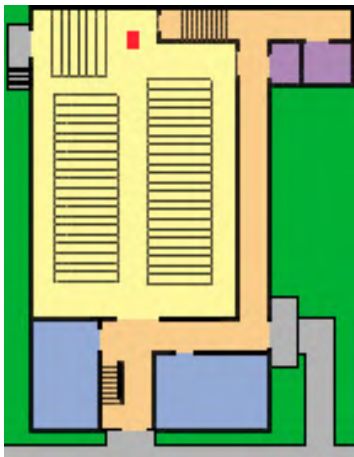
Furthermore, the small auditorium could be used for Wednesday evenings or at any other service when less than 250 people were present without incurring the expense of heating the larger auditorium. (Air Conditioning was not planned for in this building.) In later years, there were several occasions where there were more than 600 people in attendance and the small auditorium was used as “overflow seating” by leaving the folding doors open.

The drawing at right depicts the “footprint” of Lot 8 once the educational building (shown in brown) was complete. As Reichardt said, the educational building was built as if it was a complete, stand alone structure, but one that would allow a seamless addition of the second structure later with a minimum amount of work. Once the second of the two stages was complete the finished building would look “unified” as if it had been built in the normal way. The general contractor was W. H. Patterson.

In 1947 “Stage One” of the construction began with the demolition of the two houses on Lot 8 which were currently being used as classrooms. Obviously, those houses had to go so the construction could begin. By confining all work to lot 8, the Stucco Building on Lot 7, was not affected and could continue to be used for regular services. Since the two houses were removed, the preacher's house located just behind the stucco building would temporarily be used for the classrooms, and perhaps, the store building just across the alley.



As described earlier, the "Educational Building," was a two story structure that would be placed on the South “S” end of Lot 8 oriented along the 140 foot length of the lot as shown in this drawing. The small auditorium would be furnished with enough pews to seat 250 people and would temporarily serve as the sanctuary once the “Stucco Building” was gone.

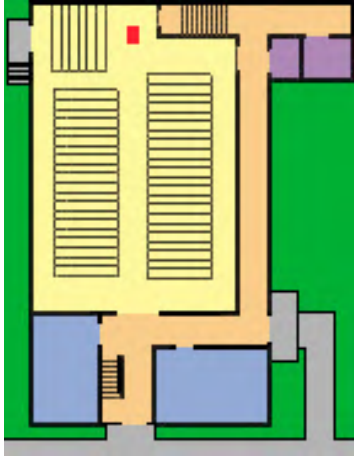


However, when the yet-to-be-built large auditorium was completed in the second stage of the building process, it would become the primary place for the worship period.

Once this small auditorium was placed in use, the preacher would stand where the red square is positioned, and Jo Anne remembers there was a raised platform in that area on which the preacher would stand. Notice the six rows of pews at the upper end of the drawing aligned perpendicular to the other pews. This was so the members didn't need to turn their heads in an acute angle to see the preacher or teacher. Since the pews only seated about 250 people, folding chairs were sometimes used in the aisles to provide additional seating before the large auditorium was completed!

The two pale blue rooms on the ground floor were initially used as classrooms for the high school and “young adult” classes, but later the one on the right became the preacher's office and the one on the left became a library with book cases along the walls and two large tables placed end-to-end in the center of the room. For a short time it also served as an elder's office.

The two bathrooms (shown in purple) were located off the hallway (tan) on the east



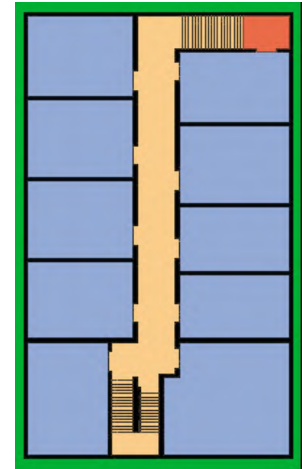
side of the building, which will later connect into the entrance foyer (through a nursery) when the second stage is complete.

Notice there are three entrances / exits to this “stand alone” building: A small door on the left (west side) near the top of the drawing, opens onto a small, covered concrete porch with steps to the ground. There was also a set of double doors off the hallway that ran the length of the building on the east side and opened onto another concrete porch with a walkway to the South “S” street sidewalk. The final entrance/exit was a second set of double doors located on the south side of the building (between the two blue rooms) that

opened onto a third concrete porch that abutted the sidewalk that ran along South “S” Street.

The entire upper floor, shown at right, consisted of ten large, but conveniently sized classrooms arranged with five rooms on either side of a center hallway that ran the length of the building with a staircase to the ground floor on each end.

The back staircase came down next to the two restrooms shown in purple on the upper drawing, and the hallway toward the exterior doors. The front staircase came down into a small entrance foyer next to the double doors into the rear of the small auditorium.



The small orange room in the upper right corner of the upstairs drawing is a storage closet accessible from inside the last classroom on the east side. However, inside that closet is another doorway (on the left as you enter the closet) that leads up a set of stairs into the attic above the second story.

That attic space was completely floored with plank flooring and used for storage. The original roof for the entire new building was planked with one by twelve pine planking then overlaid with tar-paper, and a final surface of thick slate shingles which were supposed to last at least 50 years. (They almost did, but tennis ball sized hail hitting 48 year old slate, got the better of them in 2008.) There were several stacks of those slate shingles stored in that attic in case hail “cracked or broke” some of the shingles. I picked up one of those shingles and it was heavy! I have no idea what the cost would be to put that kind of a roof on a building today.

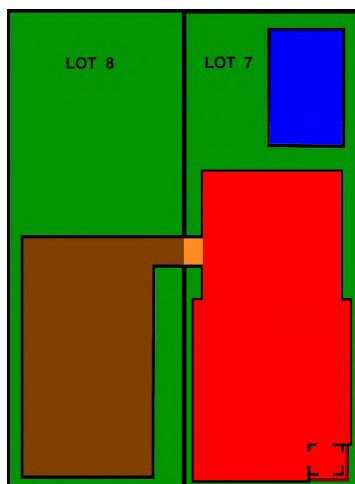
Once the large auditorium was completed in Stage Two of the construction, part of the roof was removed so the main auditorium could be joined with the educational building and the two roof lines would match and look natural. When completed this attic opened directly into the attic above the front portion of the large auditorium which was very dark, very large, and very scary — especially at night, or if someone turned out

the light while you were up there! Truly, there was no light source in those attics, so they could be really dark. I made it a habit to never, ever go up there without a flashlight. Never, Ever!

It took a little more than eighteen months for the construction of the educational building to be completed. It began in late 1947 and was completed in April or May of 1949. Some of the work, such as cleaning up at the end of every day, and other minor, but needed work, was done by the members of Park Hill in order to help reduce costs. The total cost for this part of the construction was approximately forty-thousand dollars (\$40,000), but, remember, almost half of that amount had been saved before construction began.

Early in the construction of the new educational building, with the understanding that the next step would require the removal of the preacher's house, the elders determined to purchase Lot 6 (Refer back to the drawing on page 25 for a drawing) for the location of a new preacher's house to be built later.

It is early spring of 1949 and the new educational building is almost complete. Again, just as before, the elders decided they did not want to start the second stage of the construction without first having a portion of the money in hand. The building fund they started before the first stage was constructed worked well, but had been depleted with the building of the educational building. They decided to postpone the second stage for awhile until the building fund was built back up.



If they were going to continue using the stucco building for another year or so, they needed access to the educational building from inside the stucco building. This required a small change to the stucco building that would allow a direct connection to the educational building. The easiest point of connection was where there would later be a connection anyway, so they extended that hallway enough to connect to the stucco building and cut a door in the stucco building. I have attempted to show that in this drawing. It might not be exactly right, but Jo Anne says it is close. The small orange area is the hallway added to join the two buildings.

The stucco building would continue to be used for regular worship services until it was removed, about eighteen months later. The situation from 1949 until the second stage of construction was complete in 1953 was crowded but acceptable. The stucco building auditorium was about the same size as the auditorium in the educational building but the baptistery was in the stucco building. Now, though, there were ample class rooms in the upstairs of the educational building and two newly added bathrooms.

With the new classrooms in the educational building, the preacher's house (blue rectangle on Lot 7) was no longer needed for classrooms and could return to its normal

use. During the last few weeks of construction on the First Stage of the new building, W. C. Neal, the preacher left and Park Hill was searching for a new preacher.

In June of 1949 Ward Hogland, shown here, arrived to preach for the Park Hill church. Ward was a young man of 23 when he was hired to preach at Park Hill. He had attended both Freed-Hardeman college in Tennessee and Abilene Christian college in Texas. He had preached in Gorman, Texas and Meridian, Mississippi before coming to Fort Smith. While preaching in Meridian, on June 4, 1945, he married Maxine Hughey and they had one son, Larry, who was about a year old when they arrived in Fort Smith. I will let Ward tell you in his own words how he came to preach at Park Hill:



Ron, one thing I did not tell you earlier is why I moved to Park Hill in the first place. Here is the story: In 1948 I was holding a meeting in Geary, Oklahoma and on my way home I came through Norman, Oklahoma. Yater Tant lived there and I wanted to visit with him.

While there Yater asked me, "Would you like to move to Ft. Smith?" I said, "Yes, Maxine and I had talked about liking the location and its size when we passed through." Yater, said, "They are looking for a preacher and have 'tried out' several already."

He went to the phone and called Dr. C. B. Billingsley and set up a time for me to preach. I preached on a week end at both services and stayed with George and Helen Robinson. After I returned home, in a day or so, Dr. Billingsley called me and said, "The elders took a survey of the whole congregation and they said, 'We want the Indian'.

So I made plans to move. As you may recall, in the mid fifties we were having around 500 in attendance. As I recall at one time we had 7 doctors (MD's) attending our services. There were also some in the military. It was said at that time we were the second largest Church of Christ in the state of Arkansas, with Sixth and Izzard in Little Rock being larger. Cleon Lyles preached there."

Looking at this period from the benefit of hindsight, it is easy to see why most regard the decade between 1949 and 1959 as Park Hill's peak period. If we use attendance figures as our measuring stick, then that certainly would be the case, because during that decade the attendance figures were higher than at any other period so far. But there is more to a church than the attendance figures.

Yes, during that decade, in part due to Ward Hogland's efforts, the membership quickly grew to over 500 members and most of them regularly attended the Sunday morning worship service. It was also not uncommon to have 20 or 30 (and sometimes more) visitors on a Sunday morning. There were at least two Gospel Meetings where some

of our regular members sat in the small auditorium to allow more room for visitors in the main auditorium. Most Gospel Meetings back then lasted from Sunday morning through Friday night, but there were some that ran for two weeks. Even then we were often forced to bring the folding chairs from the basement to seat everyone. It has been estimated that we had as many as 700 to 725 people per service attending some of those meetings.

Even for our regular services, there was a time or two that a bus full of college students would stop in. When that happened we were "rubbing elbows" in the pews. In Park Hill's case as I'm sure was the case in other congregations around the country during that period, it was equally easy to see that there was harmony and unity of spirit that existed among the members. By 1957 the main thrust of the "Issues" was behind us so there were no serious problems facing us and the members were working strongly together to spread the gospel.

But I'm getting ahead of the story...

Back in 1949 the members of Park Hill were "comfortable" in their religion, They were not aware of the problems that were lurking on the horizon. It is my belief that part of the success of many churches during that time, was a result of the time period itself. Things moved a lot slower back then. There was no Internet that provided instant, world-wide communication, nor was there the fast-paced society of today. Airplanes were slower and most families might have one car, but few had two. Yes, life existed before cell phones, and doctors made house calls. If you had a home telephone, you probably were sharing a "Party Line" with two or three other people. To borrow a phrase, people back then were more "laid back," and as a whole, were more interested in religious truth than many are today. I often wonder, when thinking back to life in the 1950's, if we were not better off then.

For many years Park Hill sponsored a radio program that was broadcast regularly over KFPW "1230 on your AM dial," at 8:30 each Sunday morning. I don't know exactly when that radio program began to be aired, but it was before Ward Hogland moved to Fort Smith, and it continued until the mid 1980's.



Ready To Serve YOU
FROM OUR NEW, MODERN
RADIO CENTER

KFPW

The VOICE that SELLS in FORT SMITH
MULTIMILLION-DOLLAR SHOPPING CENTER OF WESTERN ARKANSAS

• AVERY-KNODEL, Inc.
National Representative
JOHN ESAU—Vice Pres.—Gen. Mgr.
J. P. WALKER—Station Manager
L. A. BLUST—Gen. Sales Mgr.

THE KFPW MARKET	
POPULATION	202,000
RETAIL SALES	\$124,971,000
NET EFFECTIVE	
BUYING INCOME	\$139,934,000

KFPW CBS
IN FORT SMITH

AFFILIATED with KTUL, Tulsa—KOMA, Oklahoma City

The AUDIENCE ACTION Source

My recollection is that the radio program, at least in 1955 when I came to Fort Smith, ran for 30 minutes, from 8:30 to 9:00 AM, but others have suggested that it was a 15 minute program. Either way, the time period would include the station announcer's introduction which included our address and the times for our services, and the ever present "station identification," required by the FCC every 15 minutes.

In the beginning, prior to 1950, the program was pre-recorded. Warren Berkley told me that every Saturday afternoon his dad, Northum Berkley, one of the deacons for the congregation, would meet the preacher at the church building and they would re-

cord the following day's program on a wire recorder. Later the wire recorder was replaced with a brand new, high dollar tape recorder, like the one pictured here.

Obviously, when Ward became the minister at Park Hill, he also became the preacher for the radio program. I am not sure of the circumstances, nor do I know whether their program was already running when Park Hill began its program, or if the reverse is true, but ultimately there came a time when the largest Baptist Church in Fort Smith



also had a Sunday radio program on the same radio station — immediately before the Park Hill program. The preacher for that Baptist church was Dr. John Kesner, shown at right. As stated earlier, Ward Hogland, shown at left, preached for Park Hill.



I'm sure it was not unusual for a radio station to have two radio programs, by two different religious groups, directly follow each other — there must have been hundreds of that type of thing happening nation-wide at the time.

But this situation might have been unique. To fully appreciate, the story I am about to relate, and that led up to a very famous and well publicized public debate, you need to be aware of Ward Hogland's ability. Ward was a very capable and dynamic young preacher who possessed a good command of scripture, and was full of enthusiasm for the truth. He had the ability to recognize false doctrine quickly, and in it's early stages. Using those characteristics, he could soundly refute error "off the cuff," quoting the scripture to confirm his points, better than most preachers I have heard.

Don't mistake my usage of the past tense in referring to Ward's capabilities. I do not mean that Ward is no longer capable of what I describe, for I'm sure that he is. I only mean that age tends to mellow all of us to a degree, and back then Ward was a young man, full of vigor. I consider Ward to be a good friend and I believe the feeling is mutual. Ward baptized me in 1956, performed Jo Anne's and my wedding ceremony in 1959, and years later, one of his grand-daughters met and married our son.

As time went on it became noticeable that Dr. Kesner was devoting his radio program to directly addressing what had been said on the Park Hill program the previous week.

Of course, that was easily done because both programs at that time were pre-recorded and there was ample time for Dr. Kesner to prepare his lesson and record it for broadcasting the following Sunday morning. When Ward decided to present his lessons for the radio program "live" it may, or may not, have been the first time a religious radio program was broadcast live in this area. Whether it was or not, it certainly thwarted the plans of Dr. Kesner.

This is how that worked: Ward would arrive at the radio station early enough to listen to Dr. Kesner's program. As he listened he may or may not have jotted down notes in preparation for his live program that was to follow. The result, though, was that within a very few minutes after the Baptist program had aired Bro. Hogland began to speak and effectively countered with the truth of the scriptures, every errant point made by the Baptist speaker. But he didn't stop there. He proposed questions that the listeners had to think about for a week before they were addressed by Kesner on his next radio broadcast. Then, when Kesner's pre-recorded reply to last week's questions would be broadcast, within just a few minutes those replies given by Dr. Kesner were quickly addressed, live on the air.

The effect was dramatic. The following paragraph is Ward's account of that time period after I sent the draft of this part of the history to him for review:

"I don't remember, either, whether the lessons were 15 or 30 minutes, but John Kesner (Baptist) was on the air before me. He tried to answer my teaching and we had quite a discussion over the air.

Later Dr. Billingsley (one of the Park Hill elders) and I went over to the Baptist church and challenged Dr. Kesner for a public debate. He refused, but when I published a flyer that showed he was a coward, and mailed it to all his members he agreed to debate me. The debate was held in May of 1950. We converted several Baptists following the debate. I believe it was 14."

I mentioned this to Harold Turner a few days ago, and received a huge laugh from him. Harold remembers the flyer Ward mentioned. As Harold described the flyer, It had a drawing on the lower part of the page depicting several Rattlesnakes, all coiled and ready to strike. Ward had labeled that drawing "Baptist Doctrine."

Immediately above the drawing of the Rattlesnakes was another drawing, this one of a huge boot labeled "The Truth." The way the two drawings were positioned on the flyer made it readily apparent that "The Truth" was about to stomp out "Baptist Doctrine!"

At the very bottom of the flyer was the challenge for Dr. Kesner to meet Ward Hogland in a debate. Of course most Baptists in the area were well aware of the "on air discussions." They listened to the radio programs just as we did.

Harold went on to say that most of the teenagers at Park Hill helped in the distributing of the flyers to homes all over Fort Smith, as well as Ward mailing the flyers to every member of the Baptist church where Dr. Kesner preached.

Ward's account of the resulting debate follows:

"I met John Kesner in the debate May 9-12, 1950. I had been at Park Hill over a year and possibly two years at this time. Dr. C. B. Billingsley was

with me when I challenged him [John Kesner] for a discussion. The Dr. was of much help to me in those early years.

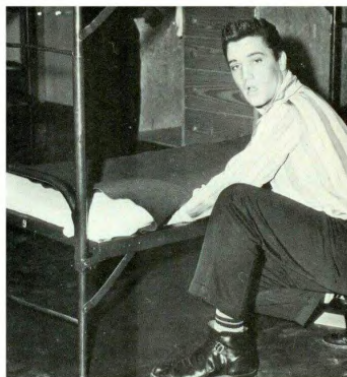
We baptized 14 Baptists after the discussion. Some were baptized at Midland Boulevard. E. E. Highers, the preacher at Midland Boulevard kept time for me during the discussion and George B. Curtiss moderated for me. At that time the issues had not divided Park Hill from Midland Boulevard.

Over 1500 people attended the discussion every night. I also met Burt F. Marrs of Stanberry, Mo. about a year later at Poteau, Ok. He was president of the Church of God - seventh day.

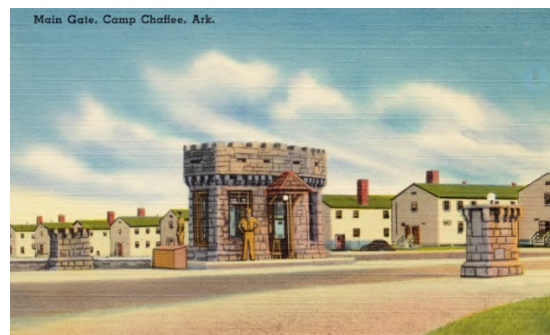
After the issues divided the congregations, Midland Boulevard hired George T. Jones as their preacher. He told me the elders warned him not to associate with me because I was poison. However after I studied with him for about two months he was converted to the truth and they fired him. After this they hired Robert Gordon Clements and I met him in a debate on the issues in the middle fifties but I cannot remember the exact date."

Park Hill's rapid growth in the period from 1919 thru the 1950's can be tied to the city's growth during that period. With only three churches of Christ to choose from in the early years all three probably showed growth. After 1937 there were still only four, at least for some period of time. I have been told many chose Park Hill because it was "the most friendly of all of them," That may have been part of the reason, but the membership willing to work together helped tremendously.

Another interesting development during the early and mid 1950's, was that the U.S. Army unwittingly helped us. Many Army servicemen received their training at "Camp Chaffee" near Fort Smith. Later the Camp was deemed large enough to become "Fort Chaffee" and was located only about 10 miles east of the Fort



Smith city limits back then. At right



is a post card showing the main gate at Camp Chaffee during that era. Many servicemen attended services at Park Hill during those years, but Elvis was not one of them. This photo was taken in March of 1958, at Camp Chaffee.

Some of those servicemen took an active role in the public worship service by leading singing, praying, helping with communion, as well as other things. Many would be invited to lunch with various families and would stay all afternoon and for Sunday evening services before returning to the camp. Near the end of the

Korean Conflict we lost about 40 members when the training at Camp Chaffee was suspended and the servicemen left our area.

Beginning in the late 1940's and continuing for most of the 1950's the entire brotherhood was plagued with "Institutionalism" — most often simply called "The Issues." Not long ago I was speaking with a lady that attends a church of Christ in Texas and she asked if I could tell her what "the issues" were in the 1950's. I gave her a brief overview and afterward she said no one had ever explained it to her prior to then.

In case you are not aware of the basics of "the issues," as she wasn't, you may not be familiar with terms such as "sponsoring churches", "church cooperation," and other matters that stem from an "Board of Governors" — the institution — taking over the control of matters that each individual should control. Actually, the whole thing boils down to the fact that the two sides were never able to agree on a common view of "Bible Authority."

For example: If we look at the New Testament to tell us whether or not we would be authorized to use mechanical musical instruments (piano, organ, guitar, trumpet, etc.) in our worship services, we find that there is nothing specifically mentioned about them in the scriptures — the scriptures are silent on that subject. So what do we do? The only possible answer is either we decide to use them or we decide not to use them.

The liberal view is: Since there is nothing said — either for or against them — then we can do whatever we want in the matter!

The conservative view is: Since there is nothing said — either for or against them, then we must not use them. It is not a matter of choice. That is as far as I will go, because this document is meant to be a history.

Historically, when the "Issues" began to heat up in the early 1950's, many different preachers were loudly proclaiming what was right and what was not - and often took opposing stands. I remember the "name calling," the preacher "black-balling," and even other, more severe issues. It is my belief that Ward Hogland's presence at Park Hill, preaching and classroom teaching, during this period allowed us here at Park Hill to take the strong stand against institutionalism and toward a more conservative path. It was an unfortunate circumstance that it also caused the "parting of the ways" between the folks at Midland Boulevard and we at Park Hill, albeit not all at once.

It was in mid-to-late 1957 when the relationship between the two congregations had become tense, even though several members remained friendly. Eventually, though, Park Hill was labeled as "Anti" by those at Midland Boulevard. This upset some of the members who had remained friendly with us, but eventually the fellowship between the two congregations broke off altogether.

With the purchase of Lot 6 back in 1947, during the early stages of construction on the educational building, Park Hill now owns Lots 6, 7 & 8 in the drawing on page 25.

That included the small store building on the alley that served as the first meeting place, and it also included the house on the corner of South "R" Street and Jenny Lind Road. I know nothing about how that house was used, if it ever was used. I don't know whether it was sold and moved or torn down, but it was gone by 1951 in order to get ready to build the new preacher's house on that lot.

The next step began in late 1950, when the decision was made to continue construction on the large auditorium. Before construction could begin the land had to be cleared of the buildings currently on Lot 7 to make room for the new auditorium to be built. The stucco building and the preacher's house must go!



The preacher's house would likely have been torn down, but an offer was received from someone to buy the house and move it off the property. This photo is of that preacher's house. It was moved in early 1951 to a lot at 1705 South "Q" Street where it still remains as a duplex rental. Billie Sue Atkins told me not long ago that she and her husband Carl almost bought that house to relocate it, but decided

against it. At the time it was moved there was a front Living Room, a combination Dining Room/Kitchen, with one Bath and two Bedrooms in the rear.

It is reported that Maxine Hogland didn't want to live in that house but Ward told me they did until the new preacher house was completed in late 1951. The only building that remained on Lot 7 in March of 1951 was the stucco building and it was time to clear it from the lot. The first step was to move all pews and furniture from the Stucco building into the new educational building so it could be used for services until the new auditorium was completed.

Once the stucco building was gone there would be no baptistery. Since in 1951 Park Hill and Midland Boulevard were still friendly, arrangements were made for all baptisms to be done at the Midland Blvd. church building until the new auditorium was ready for use.

Rather than demolishing the stucco building, it was carefully torn down so that some of the material could be used in the building of the new preacher's house. Plans for the new preacher's house had been drawn, a building permit was obtained. I believe the foundation had also been started.

Three things were being done at the same time, and I'm not sure of the sequence of each, so they may not necessarily have been done in the order they are mentioned in the three paragraphs below:

The construction on the new preacher's house had begun with the laying of the foundation. With some material being gleaned from the stucco house, and the rest purchased, the house was quickly framed and construction went pretty quickly after that.

The members at Park Hill at that time included at least two home builders, one licensed contractor, a professional painter, and a plumber. One of the home builders, Elmer Bridges, was one of the elders. He oversaw the building of the new preacher's house and a lot of the manual labor was done by members of Park Hill. Of course the special needs were done by masons, electricians, and licensed sub-contractors.

The stucco house was being torn down and material that Elmer deemed useable for the new preacher's house was being stored over on Lot 6 to be used in the building of the new preacher's house. This went rather quickly because the siding, stucco, and roofing shingles were not going to be used and were quickly hauled away. However, a good amount of the framing timbers, studs, rafters, flooring, etc. were stored on lot 6. The job was completed in less than two months.

Excavation had begun for the building of the new auditorium. On Lot 8 between the alley and the new educational building, and on Lot 7 where the old preacher's house had been sitting was leveled to the proper height, and markers set. Once the stucco building was gone they could really move quickly. The basement under the stucco house was crushed and hauled away. The pit was enlarged to the proper size and twelve special holes dug down below the bottom of the basement as foundations for the solid pillars that would support of the roof trusses were dug, formed, and poured full of concrete. Then the basement walls were formed and poured with concrete. Soon, the main structure was going together and the pillars extended and "pockets" formed to accept the specially built beams and trusses that were lifted by cranes and secured. By late 1952 the new auditorium was nearing completion with only some interior finishing work to be done. Finally the new custom made twenty foot long pews arrived. The pews were solid oak and custom built for the slanted one-inch thick oak flooring. It was finished in January of 1953.

With the new auditorium seamlessly joined to the rear of the educational building and completed, an opening was cut into the wall behind where the preacher had stood on the raised platform in the small auditorium and a doorway into the new part was installed. The raised platform was removed to allow a smooth transition into the new auditorium.

Once completed, the floors matched perfectly and it was impossible to tell where the new part was joined to the older part. It was finally a complete building!

The following paragraph was written by Isabel Laws Peale and appeared in the South-west American newspaper in mid January, 1953:

"The new auditorium was to be a grand place to worship! When completed in early January 1953, at a cost of \$110,000.00, a dedication service was held on January 11, 1953. Over seven-hundred people attended that service.

The beautiful buff brick auditorium just completed seats 700 people. Natural

wood doors open wide to welcome the worshippers. A religious atmosphere is apparent at the first step into the interior. Cathedral type lights hang from a vaulted and beamed ceiling. Warm light streams through the many stained glass windows and a glowing red carpet covers the chancel and aisles.

Mothers with small children have not been forgotten. To one side is a small room, filled with tiny furniture and cribs. A picture window permits adults to watch proceedings in the auditorium and a loudspeaker from chancel to nursery enables them to hear the services.

The nursery is completely soundproofed so that no small-fry noises will disturb other worshippers. In the basement is space for classrooms and other church activities."



In truth, the new auditorium was a work of art in and of itself! All of the exposed woodwork, except for the ceiling beams and open trusses, are solid oak, finished in an antique stain and then varnished. The huge, complex Redwood beams you see in this photo were made "out west" to exact specifications and were already stained and varnished when they arrived in Fort Smith. They were lifted into place by a crane and fit into "sockets" at the top of concrete and steel pillars that went down through the floor and basement into solid footings well underground.

The floor is tongue and grooved one-inch thick oak that was sanded, stained and varnished to match the woodwork. The peak of the 12/12 pitched ceiling is 36 feet from the floor at the back wall.

You can see the opening framed in oak where the baptistery is located. That opening is at least 20 feet tall. Originally it was as you see it, but there came a time when pleated and lined velvet draw draperies which matched the color of the carpeting were put up to cover the opening. It was done because the heated and constantly circulating water caused a moist vapor that might cause mold and also bothered some of the members. It was hoped the lined draperies would solve that problem. It helped, but eventually a floating plastic sheet was cut to fit and that helped a lot. The only problem was removing and replacing it when a baptism occurred. You could not remove it without getting water splashed on you. To keep the baptistery water clean and clear, a chlorine solution was added and the baptistery was drained, scrubbed and refilled four times a year.

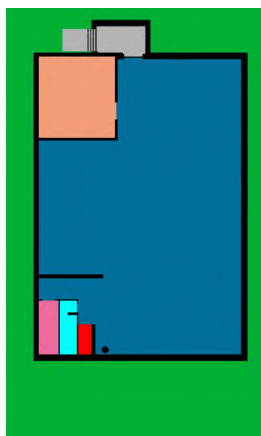
Much, if not all, of the finish sanding, staining and varnishing of the floor was done by members of the congregation and many ladies helped with that. Long hours were put

in by many members to keep the overall costs down. The pews arrived in two ten-foot sections and were joined by professionals sent from the supplier, into twenty-foot long single pews, each supported at five places over their length. There were two rows of those pews. The auditorium, before the 1990's remodel, would seat 700 people, but it required close sitting.

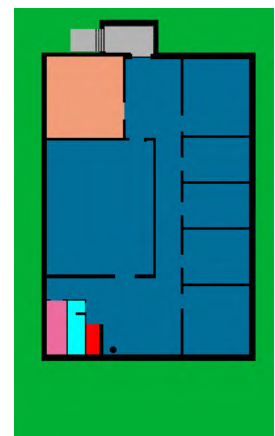
Very few people noticed that the floor of the auditorium was sloped! At the back of the auditorium the floor is a full foot and a half (18 inches) higher than at the front. The slope of the floor is not noticed because of the length of the auditorium. Nor is the slope of the foyer floor noticed, but it had to be sloped the same as the auditorium to make the smooth transition from the foyer into the auditorium. Most people never noticed that the bottom of the pews are cut at an angle to match the slope of the floor.

The seamless way the new auditorium knitted into the Education Building required the floor heights of the two stages to be carefully considered and monitored since there was to be an opening from one auditorium into the other. This difference is only detected in the hallway that runs down the side of the main auditorium from the nursery to connect with the hallway of the educational section. The hallway floor is level but originally there were steps leading up into the nursery just past the men's bathroom. There was also a single step up into the auditorium at the end of the hallway in the educational section of the building. Later, after an extensive remodeling project in the late 1990's, the side entrance to the auditorium was walled in and the nursery was moved, new more modern bathrooms were added, and the steps into the foyer were replaced with a sloped ramp for handicap access.

If you are familiar with the building you might want to skip this next bit as it intended to show the layout of every level of the building and identify each room:



I will start with the basement — Initially, the basement was primarily one big room as shown at left. The lower part of the stairway down from the foyer is shown in red, the two bathrooms are next to the stairway, and the Tan area is the kitchen. The black dot next to the stairway is a water fountain. There is an exit to the north under the landing that forms the north exit from the main building. Initially, the blue area was one big room, but later partitioned into classrooms as shown in the drawing at right.

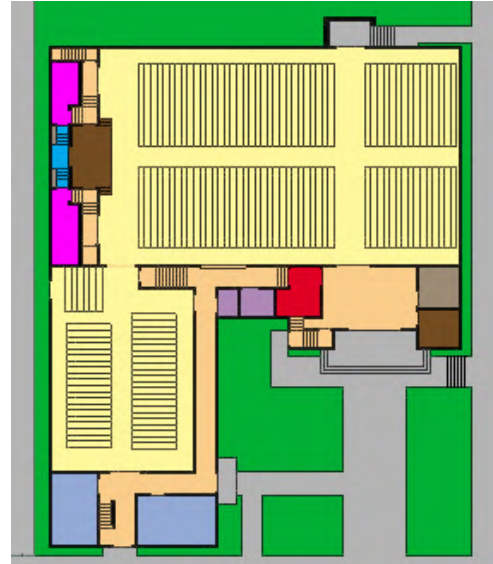


At the top of the next page is a drawing you have seen several times before. It is the complete building's "ground floor." As previously mentioned, the two bright purple rooms are elevated about 6 feet above the floor at the front of the auditorium. They are the baptistery dressing rooms. As you face the baptistery, the ladies dressing room is on the right and men's is on the left.

The blue area between the two purple rooms is the baptistery itself.

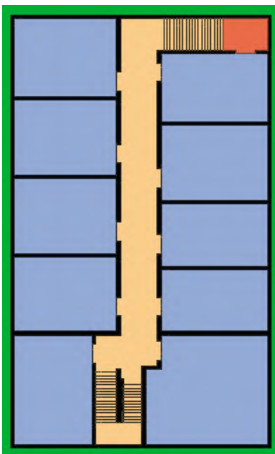
The brown area in front of the baptistery is raised 18 inches above the main floor and is where the preacher and song leader stood during their part of the services. Of course, the yellow areas with the pews drawn in are the two auditoriums. The pews in the large auditorium were 20 feet long and the pews in the small auditorium were 15 feet long.

In the center of the drawing there are two small light purple rooms. These are the two ground floor restrooms. They are small with the ladies on the left and the men's on the right. To the right of those restrooms, the red "L" shaped room is the nursery. It could be accessed from the hallway up a few steps, or from the entrance foyer directly. There was a large window that allowed viewing into the auditorium and a speaker with a volume control for sound.



Across the foyer from the nursery are two rooms. The darker brown one was initially the preacher's office and the lighter brown one was the audio control room and the elder's office.

The two rather large light blue colored rooms near the bottom of the drawing were used as classrooms — one for "young adults" and the other for special classes. Years later the one on the left became the library, and the other became the preacher's office since the dark brown room was too small.



We have already discussed the upstairs classrooms above the small auditorium shown on the left. The largest room on the right side of the hallway, just at the top of the front stairs became the "young adult" classroom when the library was established in the late 1970's and when the preacher decided the brown room next to the foyer was too small for his office.

The only photograph of the new preacher's house that I have, is shown in this photo, and it is from the rear.

I drove by to get a picture but could not get one of the front of the building. It was sold in the early 1980's and is now a commercial establishment.



In the April 22, 1956 Park Hill bulletin it was stated: *“The contribution was over \$700 Sunday.”* I believe the contribution was averaging about \$650 and that may have been the first time it went over \$700.

In the May 16, 1957 Park Hill bulletin it was stated: *“About two weeks ago we made an accurate count of the number attending our morning worship services. This was an average audience and the number was 530.”*

In October of 1958 the note: *“If things continue as planned, the building debt will be eliminated on April 15, 1959!”* That statement deserves a bit of accounting:

Not counting the initial purchase of Lot 7, and not counting the initial construction of the stucco building, and not counting the 1930 purchase of Lot 8, or the remodeling costs of the stucco building, but beginning in 1946 with the building of the forty thousand dollar (\$40,000.00) educational building, look at these figures:

\$ 40,000.00	Educational building
\$ 110,000.00	Large auditorium
\$ 20,000.00	New preacher's home
<u>\$ 5,000.00</u>	Lot 6 for new preacher house
\$ 175,000.00	

Yes, they did have a building fund of over \$18,000.00 when they started, but essentially they spent a Hundred Seventy-five Thousand dollars, and was debt free in just a bit less than twelve years! Since you are probably reading this sometime after 2017, that probably does not seem so impressive you, because plenty of other folks have done similar things, so let me put that in perspective:

In that decade, the Federal minimum wage reached a high of **One Dollar (\$1.00) per hour**, or \$40 per week if you worked the standard 40 hour week. According to the last Consumer Price Index (CPI) data provided by the Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics of the United States government, at the time I'm writing this, the value of the dollar has lessened greatly over the years because of inflation. The published figures in December of 2016 show that to buy today, what \$1.00 would buy in 1953 (the period we are talking about) you would have to spend \$10.22 in 2016 dollars.

If my math is correct that means to accomplish today what they accomplished between 1947 and early 1959, a congregation would need to pay off a MINIMUM debt in the amount of **\$1,789,600.00** (One Million, Seven Hundred Eighty-Nine Thousand Six Hundred dollars) in less than twelve years. And that doesn't include all of the money spent.

That feat is a testament to the dedication of the membership at that time. But to make it even more remarkable — During that time, two other pieces of property were also bought: Lots 9 and 10 in the diagram on page 25 were also purchased and the houses that were on them removed to provide parking for the members.

I do not know the cost involved with the demolition of the houses or the cost of leveling and preparing the lots for paving, but an estimate might be another \$30,000 or so, which would be another \$300,000 in 2016 dollars, was spent while they were paying off the loans.

Well... to finish this part of the history, Ward Hogland moved to Texas in very early 1958 and in February of 1958 William E. Wallace, son of Foy E. Wallace, came to work at Park Hill. This photograph of Bill was taken around that time and I thank his family for providing it.



In the bulletin for March 30, 1958 "Bill" Wallace reported that he and two other members drove to Conway, Arkansas to hear Roy Cogdill preach a sermon on *"The One Body."* Bill reports, *"he preached nigh unto two hours exalting the church as the one body. The time seemed only a matter of minutes..."* If you will permit me to be facetious for a bit, I'll say that Bill's thinking a two hour long sermon seeming like a "matter of minutes," is because he had to listen to his dad while he was growing up. If you have had the good fortune to hear a lesson by Foy E. Wallace you will understand.

With the summer of 1958 quickly approaching, the elders have begun planning for the Vacation Bible School. It will be held June 2nd through 9th and interestingly they have planned for the adults to attend and Judson Woodbridge will be doing the preaching. As you may remember it was Woodbridge that was the minister at Park Hill in 1937 when the tent meeting was held on the north side of town.

Three events that occurred during 1958 caused a rather abrupt change in the preaching situation at Park Hill. The first event was that the building loan would be paid off in the early part of the following year. With that in mind, the elders had been discussing the idea of having two full-time paid preachers working with Park Hill. There were a number of small outlying communities around the Fort Smith area with churches who could not afford a full time preacher. While it was true that several young men (some being members of Park Hill) were filling those pulpits, the elders supposed it might be a good thing to have an established preacher "rotate" with the young men to fill those pulpits, and having two preachers at Park Hill would allow that to happen. The two located men could also alternate with each other while keeping the local pulpit filled. They spoke to Bro. Wallace about the idea and he was enthusiastic about it. They made the congregation aware of their plan and the congregation seemed to be in favor of it as well.

The second event that had a bearing on things was that Cecil B. Douthitt had a gospel meeting scheduled with Park Hill later that year. The congregation liked Douthitt's preaching, as did the elders, so during that meeting they approached Douthitt with their plan and he was also enthusiastic about it and agreed to talk further with the elders about that possibility. They found out he was getting close to retirement age and had

been looking for something similar to this plan. After speaking with his wife he accepted the offer Park Hill was making, and agreed that he would move to Fort Smith and begin on June 1, 1959.

The third event happened late in the year — November of 1958 I think — and came from the Southside church of Christ in McAlester, Oklahoma. Their preacher, Bro. Petty, (I don't remember his first name.) was leaving and a special need had arisen there in McAlester. Earlier, the "issues" had caused some animosity between the members of the church there and some members had begun a new congregation (Southside). The members at Southside felt they needed a preacher with experience and acute knowledge of the "Institutional issue." Bro. Wallace went to McAlester and met with the men there. When he returned he spoke with the elders in regard to his moving to McAlester. The Southside church did not have the means to fully support Wallace, but could provide about half of his need.

This knitted well with what the Park Hill elders had in mind, and since the loan was almost paid off, the elders agreed to furnish the remainder of Wallace's salary with him moving to McAlester. The elders contacted Douthitt to see if he could come earlier than June 1, but he was not able to do that.

I believe it was on the 2nd Sunday in December, 1958, when Burton Neugent, one of the elders for Park Hill, addressed the congregation in regard to the future plans. The gist of what he said is:

A special need had arisen in McAlester and in line with the elders plan to support two preachers, Park Hill was willing to modify that plan to help with that need in McAlester.

Bill Wallace will move to McAlester, Oklahoma and begin working with the Southside congregation there on January 1, 1959. Park Hill will help by paying a portion of Bro. Wallace's salary directly to him. The Southside congregation will meet the remaining need.

Bro. Cecil Douthitt has accepted the offer to work with Park Hill, but he cannot begin his work here until June 1, 1959. Park Hill will fully support Douthitt.

The elders are working on an arrangement with several preachers known to the congregation so the pulpit at Park Hill will be filled in the interim between January and June of 1959.

The arrangements that were made to fill the pulpit at Park Hill was agreed upon when three preachers agreed to help: Fanning Yater Tant, Harold Sharp and David Tant (Yater's son). In addition, Bill Wallace would come back and speak on April 5th, and a spring meeting had been arranged with Ward Hogland to be here April 20th through the 26th.

The remaining assignments will be filled with Harold Sharp and the two Tants.

According to the membership directory for 1959, the preachers were: William E. Wallace and Cecil b. Douthitt.

The elders were: Elmer Bridges, Herbert Brock, Johnny Mathis and Burton Neugent.

The deacons were: N. E. Berkley, Elmer Geren, L. W. House, George Roberson, R. H. Turner, and R. F. Wise.

In this photo, Cecil Douthitt is the one in the grey suit. The back three left to right are: Johnny Mathis, Herbert Brock and Burton Neugent. I don't know the other person, but suspect he is a visiting preacher.

So to conclude this period of the history: By June 1, 1959, the time Cecil B. Douthitt arrived, Park Hill had paid off all loans, had a new, adequately sized building in excellent repair, a little money in the bank, and a regular Sunday morning attendance that numbered above 500 members. Things were looking good.



Over the Peak and Down — (Period Covered: 1960 through 1978)

Cecil B. Douthitt had moved to Fort Smith and had become the local preacher, but Park Hill was also helping to support several preachers when the congregations for which they preached were not able to fully support them. Most of those places were in areas outside of the city of Fort Smith, but within two hours driving time from Fort Smith. One or more of the elders and sometime with one or more deacons would often visit these churches to check on the preaching being done in these areas.

In regard to the institutional issues, the money for the preachers Park Hill was helping to support was always sent directly to the individual preacher, never to the church. In addition to those preachers being helped near Fort Smith, Park Hill also helped support preachers in other states as well as foreign preachers located in South America, Africa and the Philippine Islands. Dozens of preachers were helped in this way. Cecil Douthitt was a well known and appreciated preacher with an exceptional command of

the gospel. He was not one of the “fire and brimstone” preachers you often hear about, but rather, he spoke in a pleasing, normal tone of voice as if he was talking directly to you and no one else.

He rarely preached longer than 20 minutes and I don’t recall him ever speaking longer than 30 minutes, but you were almost mesmerized during his sermons. He often would reply, when asked why he only spoke for 20 minutes, “If you have your material prepared as you should, that is as long as it takes.”

He made a surprise visit to our house one Saturday, not long after he moved to Fort Smith. (Jo Anne and I lived one block from the building, on the corner of South “S” Street and South 21st Streets.) He said he was “out walking” and stopped in. Now remember, he is approaching his “retirement years,” and Jo Anne and I are 17 and 18 years old respectively, and have only been married about five or six months. I had never been visited by a preacher before. I asked him to sit on the couch, and Jo Anne asked if he would like something to drink. I wasn’t sure how to handle the occasion, but our new kitten came to our rescue.

Jo Anne’s family were cat people whereas my family were dog people. Naturally, when Jo Anne and I married we got a Siamese kitten... and named it Pyewacket. (We had recently seen the movie “Bell Book and Candle,” with Cary Grant, in which the witch played by Kim Novak, had a Siamese cat named Pyewacket.) Our kitten was very friendly, but playful. Perhaps, from the photo earlier, you noticed that Cecil Douthitt didn’t have much hair. When I asked him to sit on the couch, Pyewacket immediately, was up on the back of the couch... walked slowly toward Cecil, and plopped down right on top of his head. To Cecil’s credit he did not scream; he did not jump up; he did not attempt to brush the kitten off his head... he sat there with a kitten curled up on his head. I figured he must be a pretty good guy. Of course, when Jo Anne came in with his glass of water, she got upset and plucked the kitten off the preacher’s head.

Cecil once told me that audiences can not concentrate on a lesson for longer than about 15 or 20 minutes, then their minds will begin to wander. I knew that because my mind would do that. I believe that was the real reason he preached short lessons.

Below you see the front of the auditorium consisting of a raised area similar to a stage in a theatre. The large podium on the right is where the preacher usually stood. The smaller podium on the left is where the song leader would stand while directing the singing. A mounted microphone was on the song leader’s podium, but the preacher had a “lapel mike” that was attached to the preacher’s podium with a 20 foot cord to allow him to move around a bit. Cecil Douthitt never used the podium. Instead, he



would “wire himself up” then walk to the center of the stage where there was no podium. He always positioned himself near the front of the “stage” with his bible that he rarely opened, and no notes.

He would quote the scriptures for his lessons from memory, only occasionally, referring to his bible. He would speak about 15 or 20 minutes to make the point he had decided to stress, then offer the invitation.

Jo Anne and I left Fort Smith in October of 1960, but Jo Anne moved to live with her parents until I finished Air Force basic training and "Technical School" then she joined me in Biloxi, Mississippi where I was teaching.

By 1961 Bill Wallace, at McAlester, no longer needed support from Park Hill, so the elders had the money to hire Yater Tant to come for one year to teach some special classes and join with Cecil Douthitt in the work. Several young men who attended Park Hill had become interested in preaching the gospel and began to preach for smaller congregations around the Fort Smith area when those congregations could not support a preacher, or if their preacher was on vacation, or out of town, or ill, or for any other reason.

1962 saw two major changes: First, Cecil had reached the age where he could retire. He had previously made it known that his plan was to retire effective on the last day of 1961 in order to give the elders time to locate and hire a new preacher. They were able to get Bro. Gene Frost, shown here, to come and work at Park Hill beginning in January 1962.



In no way connected to Bro. Frost's coming, the group who had made it known in mid 1961 they would be leaving to begin the Southside church of Christ, had secured a building and would quickly get it in order and leave Park Hill. This will be covered a bit later.

The brethren leaving Park Hill to start the Southside congregation was just one of many situations occurring in Fort Smith during the latter part of the 1950's and extending into the 1970's wherein groups of members were leaving their "parent" churches to form other congregations. In some of those situations there was no animosity, hard feelings, or doctrinal differences. In others there were all three. New congregations were formed but unfortunately, each time a new congregation was formed the "core membership" usually came from an existing church which suffered.

Perhaps this is a good time to review the various churches of Christ within the city of Fort Smith. It is not my intent to misrepresent any group, so if you have reason to believe what I say is incorrect, please notify me by email at: granddadron@yahoo.com. Upon receiving the information I will make any necessary corrections to this history.

To keep the chronology accurate, I will attempt to describe the various congregations in the order in which they were formed. I will provide the history I know and the current state or condition of each church as I know it. You already know that prior to 1950 only four churches of Christ were meeting in Fort Smith: Dodson Avenue, Park Hill, Midland Boulevard, and North Ninth Street, but I will briefly cover those as well.

Dodson Avenue church of Christ:

(No longer exists)

As stated in the early part of this history it is believed that the Dodson Avenue church of Christ was the first church of Christ in this area, being formed in 1911 when a group of members of the First Christian church decided to leave and form a new church.

Photo Not Available

For a certainty it was the congregation from which the Park Hill congregation was established. From notes received from Winton Carson, a former member of Dodson Avenue, the following is stated in regard to the forming of the Park Hill church: *"A number of people were obviously unhappy with the anti-bible class belief and left the congregation in 1918 and started the Park Hill Church of Christ. There may have also been some other differences."*

Winton Carson, also states in a short history he wrote: *"For several years Dodson Avenue had bible classes and probably used curtains to divide the classes because there were no classrooms in the building. One Sunday there was a very small attendance for some reason and the leaders decided to have only one class that day. They liked that arrangement so well they continued having only one class. The congregation eventually came under the influence of preachers who believed that the bible class arrangement is unscriptural."*

The Dodson Avenue church felt strongly about not "dividing the assembly." They did not have individual bible classes based on age or grade in school, but rather, everyone met together in the sanctuary for one bible class, then after a short break they held the worship service.

In 1953 the original building that had been "built in one day" was remodeled and a brick façade was added all around the building. They built a sloping ramp on the south side (Dodson Avenue side) of the building for handicap access.

Winton also wrote: *"In 1960 about half of the members became unhappy with the congregation and started the Wheeler Avenue church of Christ. These people (the ones who left) believed the congregation had become too liberal in its fellowship of certain brethren."*

In early 1985 the members decided to close the congregation because their number was rather small and the remaining members all decided, individually, which churches each wanted to join. Some went to the North 50th street congregation, some to the Wheeler Avenue congregation, and others to the congregation in the towns of Jenny Lind, Mansfield, and Greenwood.

A group of pharmacists purchased the building later in 1985 for \$45,000 and the

money was divided evenly among the five congregations listed above with each church receiving \$9,000. The building was torn down in 1990 to make room for the new pharmacy.

Additional note: There were several public discussions (debates?) on the individual bible class issue that took place. When Judson Woodbridge moved to Fort Smith in 1937, a public debate took place at the Park Hill church building with Judson Woodbridge affirming that bible classes were scriptural and N.O. White (the preacher at Dodson Avenue) denying that position. In 1940 the same issue was again discussed with the same men for and against the issue. This time the discussion was held in the Dodson Avenue church building.

In the Spring of 1947 a series of discussions were alternately held at the Dodson Avenue building and the Park Hill building with Sterl Watson speaking for having classes and N.E. Rhodes against classes.

In December of 1948 at the Greenwood, Arkansas church building another series was held with Sterl Watson for classes and Van Bonneau against classes.

In the Spring of 1951 in Booneville, Arkansas, another debate took place with Sterl Watson for classes and Lester Hathaway against classes.

The last that I'm aware of was held in September of 1951 in Sallisaw, Oklahoma with Ward Hogland speaking in favor of classes and Ralph Gage speaking against classes.

Park Hill church of Christ:

This congregation began in the Fall of 1918, when 19 adults, with their children, left Dodson Avenue to form the Park Hill church of Christ. Since this church is the subject of this history no further comments will be made here.



Ninth Street church of Christ:

(This congregation still exists)

According to their website the following is recorded:

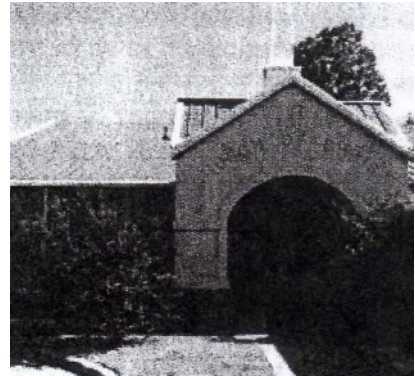
"The history of the Ninth Street Church of Christ starts in 1929. This particular Fort Smith congregation of the churches of Christ owes a great debt to men who made a decision and early commitment to give up all and preach the gospel.

Brother Marshall Keeble held meeting on the campus of Lincoln High School. A small group obeyed the gospel and was baptized in Alphonso Trent's swimming pool by Brother Keeble. The group started worshipping in a house on North 10th Street, then later moved to a Stone Block building on North 9th Street where the floors were made of dirt and an old pug stove was used for heat.

Brother G.P. Bowser was the first minister. After a period of time the church building was torn down and in 1943 was replaced with a concrete block building with wooden floors. At this time Brother A.J. Colston became the minister.

In 1996, under the leadership of Bro. Nokomas Rodgers, this congregation completed the first phase of a ten year building program with a new auditorium. In 2003 under the leadership of Bro. Tommy Brooks, they successfully completed the second phase of the program with additional auditorium space and a new gymnasium/fellowship hall."

It is sad to see that they have followed the influence of liberalism to reach this point. I preached for this congregation a few times in their old building. The brethren I knew from that period would be saddened to hear what is quoted in the last paragraph above.



Midland Boulevard church of Christ:

(This congregation no longer exists with this name. Over the years it has grown, moved twice, separated and joined back together. This is a photo of the building that was built on the corner of the land they purchased in 1937).

In 1937, after Park Hill had held a tent meeting on the north side of Fort Smith, a few members determined to establish a congregation on the north side of town. They called them-



selves the Midland Boulevard church of Christ. During the early years there was harmony between the two congregations, and both grew in number at a fantastic rate. Even though Midland Blvd. no longer exists as an entity, it does in spirit. Through the years it spawned other congregations, moved to new locations and changed its name as will be detailed as we go along.

The following quote, which differs only slightly from a record I have, was available on the West-Ark church of Christ's website until recently when the site was updated:

"The Midland boulevard church of Christ had its beginning in the summer of 1937. A meeting was held under a tent at the corner of North 28th Street and Midland Boulevard. Brother Judson Woodbridge did the preaching. Following the meeting a small group of about 12 to 15 people continued to meet in a dwelling house located where present building now stands. Brother John Stover not only did the preaching, but he also did the janitor work without pay. Such dedication and faithfulness bore fruit and the little band continued to grow in numbers. Eventually the congregation became large enough to support a full-time minister. The elders — Claude Robertson, Ernest Polk, and R. C. Miller employed Brother Frank England. Brother England served as minister until about 1946. Brother Herbert Frazier was employed to succeed him. In 1948 the congregation had outgrown the facilities and an addition was added on for more classrooms. In 1949 Brother Ernest Highers became the minister. He stayed with the congregation for five years. During this period there was a continuous growth and in 1953 the building was enlarged to its present size. Brother Highers left in 1954 and Brother George Jones served as minister until June of 1955."

Until the mid to late 1950's there was hardly any difference between Midland Blvd. and Park Hill. Both congregations believed and practiced the same doctrine and worked together in many projects. It was not until the "Institutional Issues" that openly confronted the churches of Christ during the 1950's (beginning in the 1940's in other areas) caused strife between them. In spite of those differences, for a number of years some members of both congregations enjoyed good relationships with each other and often visited.

Just as Park Hill was growing, so was Midland Boulevard. I believe they had over 400 members in early 1956 or 1957 when they were outgrowing their building. The elders planned to build a new building on the east side of Fort Smith, and purchased some land on the corner of Waldron Road and Grand Avenue. Once that building was built the elders asked the members to choose which location they preferred to attend and if I'm not mistaken, on the 1st Sunday in October, 1958, two hundred and ten members met in the new building and called themselves the College Terrace church of Christ. I think two hundred and eleven members still attended the Midland Boulevard building at that time.

By 1958, though, there was too much discord and the fellowship waned until finally, it

became nonexistent between Park Hill and Midland Boulevard and College Terrace. All of the congregations of the church of Christ in Fort Smith were fostering other congregations into the 1970's.

May Avenue church of Christ:

(No longer exists — moved to form the North 50th Street church which does still exist.) This building is now a Vietnamese Baptist church.



In late 1946 the Dodson Avenue church decided to establish another congregation on the north side of Fort Smith. They purchased a building owned by St. Luke's Lutheran church on the corner of May Avenue and Alabama. They did some work on the building and first worshipped there on the first Sunday in January, 1947. Bro. Odell White preached that Sunday, but beginning on the 2nd Sunday in January, 1947, John Wilkinson began preaching for them. Four months later he resigned because of the stance of no bible classes, and began to preach for congregations that did have separate bible classes.

In September of 1947 Ralph Gage moved from Colbert, Oklahoma to work with the congregation. He worked with them until 1968, with a one-year hiatus in El Dorado, Arkansas. During that one-year absence Taylor Joyce preached at the congregation.

By 1967 having grown to about 100 members, the congregation moved to the north-east side of Fort Smith and built a new building at 1923 North 50th. The first service in that building was on the third Sunday in August of 1968.

College Terrace church of Christ:

(No longer exists: They merged back with the group originally called Midland Blvd. and later the Windsor Drive church which will be outlined below.)



This photo is from the West-Ark church website and is of the building as it looked in 1958. This building was eventually torn down to make room for a new building when the West-Ark church was formed as will be described later.

As stated earlier, the College Terrace church of Christ was formed when Midland Boulevard had grown to the point that the building was too small. About half of the

membership migrated to College Terrace from Midland Blvd. and first met in this building in October of 1958.

There were no problems or animosity when this church was formed. It was simply a logistical requirement. Midland Boulevard had enjoyed a substantial growth, and had reached the point where they were going to have to build a larger building. It may have been less costly for them to build a smaller building and have two congregations.

The circumstances are described in the Midland Boulevard segment.

The building shown on the previous page was located on the southeast corner of the intersection of Waldron Road and Grand Avenue. When this group was formed some of the Park Hill members left Park Hill and began to worship with this group.

Wheeler Avenue church of Christ:

(This congregation still exists.)

You might remember in an earlier part of this history where one of the former members of Dodson Avenue discusses the issue of “one cup” communion. I will repeat the statement:

"For many years the Dodson Avenue congregation, although never a 'One Cup' congregation, did give thanks for the Fruit of the Vine while it was contained in one large pitcher. It was then poured into two glasses for distribution to the membership refilling the glasses from the pitcher as necessary. That practice continued until 1942, at which time they began having individual communion cups."



According to Winton Carson (who now is a member of the Wheeler Avenue church) this congregation was formed after a new building was constructed at 5724 Wheeler Avenue in Fort Smith. They first met in November of 1960.

Once again, it was formed from members of the Dodson Avenue church when some members didn't believe in having a permanently located preacher and were not able to settle this difference of opinion, so a number of members left Dodson Avenue and formed this new congregation. It is unclear whether they might have met somewhere else while the new building was being constructed.

The Wheeler Avenue church of Christ still meets. They do not separate into classes for bible study. They do not have a “located preacher” but do occasionally have some preacher come and hold a gospel meeting. I have been told different members and guests provide the lessons.

Southside church of Christ:

(No longer exists, building photo 1983)

The Southside church was formed with no animosity, quarrels, doctrinal disputes and without a difference of opinions in its happening. It was just the feeling of a need for there to be a congregation on the south side of Fort Smith.

In 1962 a group of about 100 members, most of them living on the south side of Fort Smith, decided to begin meeting closer to their homes. With the help of Park Hill, who co-signed the note, that group of people bought the property on Cavanaugh Road and remodeled the building to seat about 200 members for worship with classrooms and an office that “teed” off the main auditorium at the back of the building. This congregation later merges back together with the Park Hill church and that will be covered later in this account. Sadly, Park Hill was the source for four congregations being formed in Fort Smith between the years of 1962 through 1975 that had a tremendous effect on the numerical strength of Park Hill! The Southside group was the first of those four even though, at the time, it was felt to be a good thing.



Texas Road church of Christ:

(Still meeting and photo is current)

In October of 1963, Brothers Bill and Taylor Joyce and others, started having services in a Union Hall building at the corner of South 28th Street and Zero Street in Fort Smith. (The picture shown below is of the building on that corner but I'm not certain its the same building.)



In late 1969 they moved into a building at 2300 Johnson Avenue on the north side of Fort Smith, and sometime in 1976 they built the new building at 6900 Texas Road on the south side of Fort Smith shown in the picture above right.



The Texas Road congregation believes that only one cup may be used in the Lord's Supper. Everyone drinks the fruit of the vine from the same cup! They also believe that the communion bread can not be broken except as each person breaks off their own portion. Texas Road also believes that it is unscriptural to divide the assembly into bible classes. At the time of this writing they still meet

and on occasion a few of their members will visit Park Hill. Perhaps someone will contact me and provide the information.

South 46th Street church of Christ:

(Still exists, building photo 2013)

The South 46th Street church still meets and was formed when a group of members left Park Hill and met for the first time on February 28, 1965 in the garage of one of the members. Regularly scheduled services continued from that time in a vacant two story house in downtown Fort Smith for about six months while plans came together for the construction of a new building at 2323 South 46th Street.



Unfortunately, this group's leaving was due to a dramatic difference of opinion in regard to a non-doctrinal matter. There may have been other issues of which I am not aware, but between 100 and 125 members left when the South 46th Street congregation was formed. Many, if not most, of the original members who were a part of that split in 1965 are no longer alive.

Although on several occasions there were folks working to reconcile the two congregations, it has not happened. It wasn't until the early 1980's that the hard feelings between "46th Street" and "Park Hill" began to soften. Once I tried to initiate a possible reuniting of the two congregations and was told by one of the original group that, "Hard feelings run deep." Thankfully, we now enjoy a good relationship.

Windsor Drive church of Christ:

(No longer exists, building photo taken 2016)

In 1970 when the Midland Boulevard church had grown to the point of needing more space, they purchased some land in the north-central part of Fort Smith, and built this building.

I believe it had an 800 seat sanctuary. Once the building was complete they began to worship at this new facility and changed their name to the Windsor Drive church of Christ. I am not certain if they sold the old Midland Boulevard building then, or if it that came later.



North 50th Street church of Christ:

(Still exists — photo recent.)

I don't know much about the North 50th Street congregation, therefore I'm uncertain, but believe they do not divide into classes for bible study and they may also be of the "one cup" persuasion. The closest date I can get in regard to when they were formed, is "early 1970's."



Old Greenwood Road church of Christ:

(No longer exists, no photo of building.)

The "Greenwood Road" church of Christ was formed sometime after May 12, 1974 when another group of about 60 people left Park Hill. That split was an angry one over what I term as "Preacher-itus." Some of the circumstances are known by me, but not all of them since I left Park Hill in 1973. I can only guess the reason for a conspicuous number of pages missing from the official minutes of the Park Hill business meetings that should be there. The gap is from May 12, 1974 to November 9, 1975 — over a year missing from the record.

What I know for a certainty is this: Having received convincing evidence of the need, the majority of Park Hill's elders were considering a change in regard to the preacher at Park Hill at that time. One of the elders, a personal friend of the preacher, did not believe the evidence, nor did he want it to become public. There was a significant number of the members who joined with that elder and made a stand against changing the preacher. It was later made known that the preacher had not wanted to leave and had cultivated a group of "backers" to approach the elders to try and convince them not to change preachers.

Because of the undeniable evidence and other circumstances that had come to light, the majority of the elders were not convinced. All but one, the friend of the preacher, were still planning to replace the preacher.

The discussion became heated and ugly. The group backing the preacher, with the support of one elder, the friend of the preacher, tried to physically gain possession of the building by force and to make the present eldership resign. They even attempted to take over the classes taught by the elders, but failed in both attempts.

When it became evident that the group was in the minority, the dissenting group — about sixty people total, including the preacher and the elder who was a friend of the preacher — decided to leave and start a new congregation. I can't remember if they

bought the lot on the corner of Old Greenwood Road and South Gary streets and built the building, or if they purchased an existing building and remodeled it, but I do remember it was a nice building. A couple of years later the building was sold when the church disbanded. The building was drastically remodeled and became a real estate office.

Blair Avenue church of Christ:

(No longer exists, recent photo)

The "Blair Avenue" church of Christ was formed in 1975 (exact date unknown) when the new leadership of the newly formed Old Greenwood Road church came to recognize that the Park Hill elders had been correct in regard to the preacher, and they were planning to replace him.



Once again, the preacher and the same elder who was his friend, along with a few other members of the Greenwood Road church left to begin the new congregation on Blair Avenue. It is my understanding that less than 20 members left Greenwood Road to begin the Blair Avenue congregation. They rented a small, vacant store building on the north side of Fort Smith on Blair Avenue shown in the picture above. (I only know what I was told by those that eventually came back to Park Hill, so likely I do not know all of the circumstances surrounding the forming of Blair Avenue.)

In regard to both the Greenwood Road and the Blair Avenue congregations: Not long after the small group left Greenwood Road to form Blair Avenue, both of those congregations fell into hard times. I was told that neither group had the finances necessary to meet their obligations. I have no further information in regard to the Blair Avenue group, but the Greenwood Road congregation sold all remaining assets, paid all monies owed and divided whatever was left among the membership. A few of the members from that congregation came back to Park Hill and some others joined themselves with the South 46th Street congregation.

West-Ark church of Christ:

(Still meeting and photo is current)

I think it was in 1984 that the College Terrace congregation merged back together with the Windsor Drive congregation. The reason given on West-Ark's website was two-fold: First, to be reunited as a group of Christians and second, to build a new building that would adequately handle the total membership.



They still owned the old College Terrace property so they made arrangements to buy additional adjoining land and built a complex that would seat from 1500 to 2000 people. I don't know all of the particulars, but they made an arrangement with West-Ark College to jointly build and use the rest of the block for parking. It is used on Sundays and Wednesdays by the church, and during school hours by the students and visitors to both organizations. With the new building complete they became known as the West-Ark church of Christ. Being joined together now, but at different times this group was known as the Midland Boulevard church, the College Terrace church and the Windsor Drive church.

I believe the foregoing to be a reasonably accurate list of the churches of Christ in Fort Smith, both past and present. Obviously, the forming of some of these congregations, regardless of the circumstances, took its toll on the parent congregation's membership both in number and in spirit.

In view of the length of this document, Part 1 will end here. Part 2 will take up at this point.