

THE WICKIZER FAMILY  
and  
FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH 1913-1920  
by  
Wilma Wickizer Rodgers  
(Mrs. Joseph Lee Rodgers)

My father, The Rev. David A. Wickizer, was pastor of the First Christian Church in Norman from Sept. 1913 to Feb. 1920. In giving the history of the Wickizer family for the Cleveland County Historical Society it is impossible not to cover much of the history of the church during the years that the family lived here. Most of you who read this know that Cleveland County was part of the area opened for settlement in 1889. The Christian Church was organized in 1890. In 1892 a red sand stone building was built on the corner of South Porter and Comanche, seating about two hundred. Sometime later several rooms were added behind the main building. It has been said that the building cost about \$2000 and was considered a very nice church. At some time around the turn of the century a parsonage was built to the north, 117 S. Porter, which the Runyan family later purchased and lived in for many years. By 1910 the congregation began plans for a new and larger building but it was not until 1913 that it was ready to put these plans into execution. At that time my father was contacted.

He was then Executive Secretary and Evangelist for the Christian Churches of Oklahoma, which position he held from 1911 to 1913, having been pastor of the First Christian Church in Tulsa from 1908 to 1911. My paternal grandparents and two uncles and their families had moved to Tulsa in 1902

and became active in the Christian Church of that young city. My uncle Charlie's four children were baptized in that church and two of them have held continuous membership and their children and grandchildren are active there now. I mention this because it is quite unusual in Oklahoma to find five generations members of the same church and some of them all their lives. My father accepted the pastorate of the Tulsa church primarily because the members were ready to build, which they did on the corner of Fourth and South Boulder, one of the largest and prettiest churches in Tulsa at that time, but it has been gone for many years now.

Dr. D. W. Chern came to Norman in 1909 to head the geology department at O.U. By 1913 he had become State Geologist but had continued to reside in Norman and he and his wife were very active in the Christian Church. During his student days at Drake University, DesMoines, Iowa (around 1895-98), he had been a member of my father's congregation there. A Mr. D. J. Morris, who was a member of the Norman Church, had been a parishioner during my father's pastorate in Oskaloosa, Iowa. These and others who knew him through the state work asked him to come to Norman the summer of 1913 to look over the situation. He and the church board came to an agreement and he began his work Sept. 21st, 1913.

He probably reached the decision to come to Norman for three reasons. First was the fact that the congregation was contemplating a new building. During his entire life he was very interested in supervising the construction or renovation of church buildings. Second, he had three children in the 8th, 10th, and 11th grades, so, since the University was here, it would assure a way for a college education for his children. But I am sure there was a third and the most important reason--he and my mother would be in contact with

many young people. They had always gotten along well with youth and they welcomed this opportunity to work with the students.

He rented a house at 305 West Main. This big white house for a number of years in the fifties and sixties was surrounded by the Cecil Wood agency but was demolished about 1970. In 1913 there were few stores near the campus and our home was such a convenient place to just happen to drop by as students went to and from town, especially around meal times. I often tired of this public life but my parents never seemed to tire of young visitors.

My father had chosen a house at this location because the church had already made arrangements to purchase the old Arline Hotel on Webster and Main Street, directly across from this house. It is the site that has been occupied for many years by the McCall Super Food Market, and adjoining stores. The three story brick hotel had been built in 1892 and was considered the finest hotel in either of the Territories. It was called The Victoria, The Hoover House and later The Arline. Mr. E. B. Johnson, who was an active member of the church, had purchased it in 1902 and turned it into a dormitory for girls. His sister-in-law, Miss Callie Graham, acted as matron. The hotel managers had never succeeded in making the business successful partly because it was three blocks from the railroad station and three blocks is a long way when streets are muddy or ankle deep in dust. For the same reason it proved too far to be used as a dormitory. There was a wooden sidewalk from town to the university but the streets were not paved until somewhere around 1912. There were some brick and cement walks and Webster Avenue and the University Boulevard were paved by the time I started to the University the fall of 1915 but I can't remember when it was done. The building was again operated as a hotel after the dormitory venture. I do not know what

arrangements were made with Mr. Johnson but he made it possible for the then rather poor congregation to buy it, and under the supervision of my father, it was turned, during the winter of 1913-1914, into a church building.

The building was ell shaped. The sanctuary, or auditorium as it was usually called, was a large square room in the center of the building made from the old lobby and several adjoining rooms from which partitions had been removed. The entrance was at the intersection of the streets. There were other doors opening onto Webster and onto Main. The pulpit and choir area, or rostrum, was in the northwest corner, opposite the main doors. There were balconies on the east and south sides and part of the west. Both the lower and balcony floors were seated with opera chairs, the lower floor semi-circular facing the rostrum. A few of these chairs are in the balcony of the present church at Eufaula and Webster. The seating capacity was about eight hundred and another two hundred could be seated on folding chairs. It was used for many purposes since it was the largest auditorium in Norman until Holmberg Hall was built in 1919. The brick was covered with gray stucco and made a very much better looking building than it had been for some time.

To the west of the auditorium was a room seating about a hundred people usually referred to as The West Room. The University S.S. Class met there on Sunday mornings, the Christian Endeavor on Sunday evenings. The church board, committees, and many small town groups used this multi-purpose room. Ruby Sullivant remembers the Camp Fire Girls meeting there. I was in the organization in 1914 with Eloise Eagleton leading. I took a picture of the group on a picnic by the old bridge on the South Canadian. Those in the picture whom I can recognize are; DeEtte Clifton, Gertrude Howe, Frances Miller, Gladys Helms, Jewel Risinger, Edna Bessent, and Eloise Eagleton.



Above this room were two rooms. The one facing Main was the pastor's office, the other was used for S.S. and small group meetings. A stair led from it to the third floor. To the north of the auditorium on the first floor, facing Webster, was the hotel dining room which became the church dining room, a fellowship hall, and a Sunday School area for small children. At the far north of that wing was the kitchen. The dining room would seat over two hundred for dinners and many more for socials. The women served many dinners to university and town groups and this was one way they made money to pay for the church. Since there were no commercial or school dining rooms in town of sufficient size to serve large dinners and banquets and only two other churches with adequate but smaller facilities, it was a popular dining room.

My mother, Alice Morgan Wickizer, organized a Christian Endeavor Society for high school aged youth, which met in the dining room. As I remember there was no other group, at that time for this age. We had well over a hundred coming from all over town and from all churches. There was no attempt at proselyting--it was just a place for teenagers to come on Sunday evenings for a worship service and a meeting conducted by themselves under understanding adult supervision. Of course soon several other churches started similar organizations. This group had a party once or twice a month on Friday or Saturday evening, or a daytime picnic. In the late sixties, on a trip through eastern Oklahoma, my husband and I stopped at Goldie's Mill near Stillwell which Goldie Risinger Yunkefer, formerly of Norman, has owned and operated for years. When I told her who I was she grabbed me and said, "Oh, some of the happiest times I ever had were at the high school parties at your home even though I didn't belong to your church. Your father and

mother were just wonderful with young people." Many young people felt the same way. My parents had a way of making young folk have a good time, a nice time, challenging them to do their best. Milt Phillips once remarked to me that my mother had had a big influence on his life. I think many young people felt there were turning points in their lives that came during these years because of their contact with my father and mother.

In the church above the dining room were six or eight rooms used for S.S. classes. Except for the very small children "opening exercises" were held for all ages in the auditorium.

The third floor of the church was left very much as it had been when a hotel, with a hall running to the west and to the north down the center of each wing with rooms on either side. These rooms were used for several years by men students needing to economize. The janitor work was done by students all the years my father was pastor. Eventually several apartments were formed on the third floor and a number of different families lived there.

My mother died at the University Hospital in Oklahoma City in June, 1917, the first World War had started in April, my brother enlisted in July, prices sky-rocketed. The church did not feel they could raise the pastor's salary which in 1913 had been \$1800 and was just over \$2000 in 1917, but they offered one of the apartments free. My father had some private business interests in connection with my grandfather, otherwise he could not have afforded to come to Norman but our extra income was not large. We moved from the house at 305 Main into six rooms comprising the west wing of the third floor. The apartment was freshly papered and fairly convenient except for the climb to the third floor.

In the remodeling of the building into a church much of the work was

done by members. The men would work in the evening and some took days off from their regular jobs. Special days were designated as "work days" and the women would serve lunch. Much of the carpentry, plumbing, painting, and electrical work was done by members, each doing what he knew best how to do. Inspection laws were not as strict in those days but my father watched everything carefully. Union labor was unheard of in this area. That first year my father lived far more in blue denim overalls than in dress clothes. People coming to find him often had to seek him high up on the building. He delighted in this work but he also loved sermonizing and pastoral contacts. He loved people and he loved life. Since he had supervised the construction of so many churches, drawing the plans, even making the blue prints, he was a very capable overseer.

When the building was nearly completed the women came day after day, cleaning, scrubbing, making curtains, and serving many, many meals to volunteer workers. I shall give the names of a number of the members later but I wish to mention Mrs. E. B. Johnson here. To see Mr. and Mrs. E. B. Johnson come into services on Sunday had a real effect on me as a girl. She was always dressed so beautifully and her home was one of the loveliest I had seen, but during the week I would see her at the church day after day cleaning, preparing, and serving meals to workers and later dinners and banquets, just like all the other women, yet I knew that she had a maid at home. It had a real influence on me that Mrs. Johnson's church meant so much to her that she would join in on the dirty work even though she might have stayed away and given money. My mother did such things but I felt it was expected of her. Mrs. Johnson was only one of several women who could have hired work done but wished to be a part of it all in a very personal way.

I am sure in 1930 when the congregation moved into its fine new church on Webster and Eufaula it could not have been any prouder than the congregation was the Sunday of the first services in the remodeled building on Webster and Main. The dedication took place on May 10, 1914, with F. M. Rains, of the church's National Board of Extension, speaking. In January, 1917, when the congregation had cleared all indebtedness a meeting was held to burn the mortgage.

Before leaving Tulsa my father had sold our horse and carriage. In February, 1914, he bought a Reo five passenger touring car, cost \$1000. As I remember this was the fourth automobile in Norman, but by 1920 there were over a hundred.

The Sunday School Class for the University Students met in the West Room. Dr. D.W. Chern was the teacher until he moved to Oklahoma City the summer of 1917. As state geologist and later in private oil business he traveled constantly but he missed very few Sundays being in Norman to teach his class. He often arrived Saturday night and returned to his work Sunday night. Mr. Chern's excellent teaching and Mrs. Chern's "mothering" of the students caused the class to be well attended.

Mr. Chern and Frank Buttram, who was also a member of the church, until he moved to Oklahoma City in 1917, started their first oil company together and brought in their first oil well while they lived here. The Cherns were having Sunday dinner at the Wickizer home when Buttram phoned long distance that their first well had blown in that morning. After the Cherns moved to Oklahoma City to 515 N.W. 14th and the Buttrams to 601 N.W. 14th, Adolph Linscheid taught the University Class for two years. He was working on his graduate degrees and later became president of East Central



State Collège.

Errett Newby was the church organist from the fall of 1904 until December of 1919. He came to Norman as a student and remained here until he left in 1920 resigning as Registrar of the University to join his family in an oil company in Oklahoma City. In 1904 he soon discovered that the organ in use had several notes that did not sound and others that squeaked and within a few months the straps that held one of the pedals broke so it was a one foot pumping job. Mrs. Johnson told him that the women of the church would pay for a new organ if he would choose one. The eventual choice was an organ with a lovely tone in a golden oak console costing, he thinks, \$340. It was used in all three of the church buildings from 1905 to 1946 when the pipe organ was installed in the present church. The young people used it in their room for some ten more years when a family bought it because of their interest in antiques. Errett Newby was a fine musician and added much to the worship services and after his marriage to Lola North her beautiful trained voice added much to the choir. Errett's sister, Merle Newby, who taught violin at O. U. and who married Frank Buttram during these years, was most generous in giving violin solos and in accompanying the choir, until the Buttram move to Oklahoma City in 1917.

My father was popular as a sermonizer and large numbers of students attended services. Mother, who was an ordained minister, was also a good speaker and often filled the pulpit if father was out of town.

In 1915 the Presbyterians built a new building diagonally across from the Christian Church, on the southeast corner of the street intersection, where the Bell Telephone Co. is today. The two churches worked together in a very fine way. Rev. Ted Ossman was the minister. His wife was a fine

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musician. He left Norman to become the student pastor at the University of Kansas, in Lawrence and served there until retirement when they moved to Florida. She is still living. Twice the churches held joint evangelistic services and the young people often had joint meetings and socials, sometimes in one church, sometimes in the other. Joe Benton and Esther McRuer entertained either or both groups frequently, Esther with her whistling and Joe playing and singing. Lucille Carson (now Mrs. Nellis Wilkinson of Wichita, Kan.) would give readings-the "entertainment talent" seemed to be in the Presbyterian Church. The Methodist Episcopal North was at Santa Fe and Bufala, built in 1915 and is now an apartment house. The pastor was a Rev. Benjamin. The Southern Methodists were in the northeast part of town. I remember a Rev. Ownby, a very fine gentleman, was their minister for several years. It was in 1916, under the leadership of Prof. G. H. Smith, that two houses on the corner of Apache and Blvd. were purchased and one was used to hold classes for the Southern Methodist students. This was the beginning of the present McFarlin Church. The Episcopal Church was best known by the students because of the King Hall dormitory for girls.

I wish to mention some of the people who were active in the Christian Church during these years yet I hesitate since I am sure to leave out some who should be included. I have far from complete records available and my memory is that of a young girl rather than an adult for this period. I left Norman in 1920 and had infrequent contact with the town until my husband and I (we became acquainted as students in the church) moved here in 1963, to be near our eldest son, Prof. Lee Rodgers, and his family.

Mr. and Mrs. E.B. Johnson were mentioned above but not their family. They had four sons and four daughters, who, while not as active as the

was a jeweler. There was a Mr. and Mrs. Fairchild. He, as a lay preacher, had assisted the congregation. She taught a S.S. Class of girls and had a lasting influence on the lives of many of them. The Brandenburgs came to Norman about 1917. They were relatives of the Fairchilds and proved a real help. She also taught in S.S. and was president of the women's society.

The H. O. Millers moved to Norman around 1911, after several years in the Big Pasture near Lawton. They were originally from Illinois. They lived on a farm south of Norman which is today occupied by the south half of the O. U. golf course. Their large white house remained there until demolished about 1964. All of the farm became part of South Base and the house was used as an officers club, a PX, and finally for storage. The importance of the Miller farm in this history is that about half of all picnics during my father's pastorate were held on the Miller farm. The young people would walk the two miles, starting at the church and being joined by others along the way. Walking was taken for granted in that day. I often wonder how Mrs. Miller put up with all the gangs but she did. There was scarcely a nice Saturday that some group was not there. Mr. Miller was in the State Legislature and assisted O.U. greatly in securing funds. They had six children but it was the two older ones who were with the young people. My brother, Willard, married Frances in the summer of 1920. Mr. and Mrs. Miller died in Kansas but they and the youngest child are buried in the Norman cemetery.

M. B. Shives, administrator at the State Hospital, was on the church board and his wife and young daughters attended with him. There were the Taylors -- Martha and Fannie and Bernice, who was S.S. secretary. There were the Haswells--Minnie, Iola, Virgie, and Billie; the Helms--Mola(a teacher),

parents, were members. The two older daughters were Mrs. Carl Giles and Mrs. Phil Kidd.

The Jesse Acree family had been members almost from the beginning of the church and for years they prepared the emblems for the Communion which is observed weekly in Christian Churches. Their three daughters, Bess, Maude, and Jessie grew up in the church. Mrs. C.A. Herrington was a charter member and had the honor of burning the mortgage in 1917. The four Herrington daughters, Pearl, Catherine, Mable, and Lucy became young women in the church during these years. Melvin McCollough was a charter member and remained a "pillar" as long as he lived. His wife and Mrs. Herrington were sisters. The McCollough daughters and their husbands (Blanche and Dan Short, Maude and Fred Lacy), their children and grandchildren grew up and remained active in the church and some are still members.

The Furrys lived just west of the church. He was a grocer, and she in her sweet way filled a real place in the church. Mr. and Mrs. Pearl Glenn lived across the street from the Furrys and their niece, Gertrude Sidener (Phillips) was part of the youth group. There were the Durkees-- I remember Margarite and Key, having taught them both in S.S.

Mr. and Mrs. R. C. Berry were regular attenders. He was a merchant in Norman for several decades and an elder in the church. His first wife, Nora, like Mrs. Johnson, had help at home but worked as hard as all the other women to pay for and furnish the building. Her death in 1916 was a loss to the church.

The C.A. Richards, like the Johnsons and Berrys, were always at church. Mrs. Richards was a fine cook and entertained many official visitors to the church. They had a son Walter and a daughter, Florene. Mr. Richards



Gladys (later Mrs. Charles Young), Ruby (later Mrs. Milt Phillips), and two Helm's sons. Mrs. Six and her son Ray were faithful attenders, also a daughter and neice and usually Mr. Six. Ray and his wife served one term as missionaries in China and then he was professor in the geology department at OSU until retirement. He is still active in the Christian Church in Stillwater. The Bartholomews had a son Earl who was at the church if the doors were open. He married Juanita Snedeker whose family moved here about 1917. Juanita had a lovely voice and often sang at church functions. Earl was one of a small group of scientists in Michigan who perfected Ethyl gasoline. Earl and Juanita now live in Carefree, Arizona. The O'Haver family was regularly represented by Waneta, now Mrs. Walter Green of Oklahoma City. There were the Powells, the Boyds, the McKittricks, the Floyd Westervelts, the Sim Dorlands (who later moved to the State of Washington), and the Flemings. Alice Polk married Ben Fleming and is still a member of the church. Dorcas Fleming married T. Earl Sullenger, who was a most loyal member while he was here as a graduate student. He has been a professor in Omaha, Neb. Helen Olander joined the church in 1917 and in 1970 was elected the only woman elder of the church. She was a school principal in Norman and lived with the F.O. Millers from 1917 until her death Sept. 14, 1972. There were the McGuires with their three daughters, Tommie, Maude, and Billie; also the Guthries, and Eula Camp who lived near the first church and joined very young.

There was a Mrs. Ora Beavers, whose daughter, Sadye Hyde and son, Herbert Hyde, grew up in the church. A younger daughter, Nellie Beavers, now Mrs. Bill Childs, is still a member. Mr. and Mrs. R.M. Proffitt and their daughters, Maude and Ida, were regular attenders. Maude married John

Newby, younger brother of Errett. John was with Dupont Corp. for years, much of the time in Delaware. Ida became a high school teacher and married M. A. Dunn of Plainview, Texas. The Proffitts had three sons who were away from home by the time I knew the family.

D. J. Morris was mentioned earlier in this article. He and Mrs. Morris had six children, four of whom were still at home in 1913 and were part of the student group. Glen and Lewis both became lawyers and judges in Oklahoma City; Ruth is a retired teacher; David went to California. Only Ruth is living. The oldest Morris son, Theo, was the father of Elizabeth Parham, a music teacher at O.U. for a number of years.

The E. J. Simpson family came in January, 1915, and made themselves very much a part of the church. He was a grocer. Their oldest daughter, Gladys, married Robert Luttrell. My father performed the ceremony. These are the parents of Dick Luttrell, manager of the Norman Hospital. There was also Anna Mae and Earl--twins. Anna Mae's membership remained in the church for fifty two years until she transferred it to Edmond when she entered the Christian Home there about a year before her death, Sept. 1968. She was buried from the Norman church. She had taught in Norman most of her adult life.

Dr. and Mrs. J. M. Williams, Christine and Ida Salin, moved here the fall of 1915. He practiced medicine here for a number of years.

The church board elected January, 1918, was as follows: Elders- E. R. Newby, E.B. Johnson, M. McCollough, James W. Gresham, George F. Fortenberry, Prof. J. W. Bridges; Deacons- Jesse Acree, H. O. Miller, Sim Dorland, E. J. Simpson, M. B. Shives, Pearl Durkee, G. P. Glenn, Joseph Nelson, Floyd Swank, Wyatt Burch, C. A. Richards; Deaconesses- Mesdames Johnson, Richards,

Herrington, Little, Newby, Acree, Williams, Dorland, Brandenburg, Furry, Fortenberry. A few of these I do not remember.

Some of the students who participated actively in the church but who did not live here were Rosetta Briegal, Carney Dean (wife of Beulah Maxwell) now of Chandler, Roy Cox (wife Carrie Majors) now of Blackwell, Frank Dougherty (wife Dottie Irene Kernodle), now of Lindsay but for many years a missionary in Ethiopia, Vern Thornton (wife Agatha Roush) became a professor at O.U., and mayor of Norman, Bridgewater who sang in choir, Earl McGinnis (wife Ima Armstrong) now of Wichita, and Ray Bowles who married my sister Lucille.

I think these years were especially influential with the young people since so many have remained active in some form of Christian service all their lives. It is not just a building that makes a church—in fact that is a minor part. Father and Mother had a way of challenging old and young to Christian commitment.