

Evangelist lived near W. Dundee

'20s preachers Sunday schooled

By Mercedes Meyers

WEST DUNDEE — The gentleman at the rostrum with the well-pressed suit, celluloid collar and center-parted hair looked the part of a minister at the turn of the century—until he began his delivery.

Fellow clergymen were scandalized when the reformed drunkard began to speak by going through gyrations resembling a baseball pitcher starting his windup and proceeded to preach with few of the pieties common to their religious training.

But the "baseball act," like the everyday slang and stories that focused on human foibles, were what made the Rev. William A. "Billy" Sunday, a former major league baseball player, a hit as the most popular evangelist of the time.

Floyd H. Rossow, 71, of 1904 Sleepy Hollow Road, Sleepy Hollow, remembers Sunday as always possessing the common touch, a fellow who didn't intimidate, but embraced his listeners.

"I remember he was tall, thin and had fiery red hair. He visited the farm (near West Dundee) often after he sold it. He was a real nice man, always joking with the other guys.

"I used to hang around the threshing machines. At that age, about 8 or 9, I was more interested in the machines than in the men's talk or I could recall bits of his famous humor. I just remember him making the guys laugh a lot," said Rossow.

A plaque at the corner of Sleepy Hollow Road and Illinois 72 in front of the Dundee Township Highway Department marks the nearby site of the farm of "Billy" and "Ma" Sunday.

HIS WIFE, Helen Thompson Sunday, 1868-1957, was dubbed "Ma" by a fond public. Her birthplace is the 100-acre farm adjacent to the site of the plaque.

The plaque, erected in 1970 by Boy Scout Troop 35, Dundee Township Historical Society and the Illinois State Historical Society, is on Rossow's property.

Some historians say the baseball player-evangelist and his wife spent only their summers from 1899 to 1913 at the farm. But Rossow disagrees.

"Billy and Helen lived in Dundee Township permanently up there on the hill from about 1918-19. He worked the farm when he wasn't away preaching at his revivals. He was an old farmer himself you know. He was always busy out there on the farm working with the rest of us."

Young Sunday's early years were spent with his grandparents and at an orphan's home.

According to William T. Ellis' "'Billy' Sunday, the Man and His Message," published by Moody Press, Chicago, Sunday often said, "I have crept and crawled out from the university of poverty and hard knocks, and have taken postgraduate courses."

His first job was with an undertaker in Marshalltown, Iowa, where his baseball career began. He was discovered playing on the sandlots by Capt. A.C. "Pop" Anson, leader of the Chicago White Stockings.

He also played for Pittsburgh and Philadelphia teams from 1883-90. During those years he was converted and began working with the YMCA in Chicago. In 1903, he became a Presbyterian minister.

At the time of his death from angina pectoris at the home of relatives in Chicago, Nov. 6, 1935, a wire story said, "He preached last in Mishawaka near his home in Winona Lake, Ind., ... His preaching there had lost some of its fire. He didn't take off his coat and vest nor start the pitching 'windup' he had used on revival rostrums for 39 years."

Referring to his baseball career, the story read: "A persistent flair for joking probably kept Sunday from becoming one of the major league baseball greats.

"BASEBALL TO SUNDAY was fun and not a serious sport ... In fact, oldtimers recall that if he had his choice of getting an important base hit or pulling a joke on someone, preferably Pop Anson, he picked the joke."

Records show he was considered a great base runner and a good fielder but a mediocre hitter.

"Hitting the sawdust trail," was his well-known metaphor to encourage the public to come to the tabernacle to experience conversion. Sawdust aisles led to his rostrum in the specially built barn-like tabernacles.

Mrs. Sunday traveled the "trail" with him as his business manager.

The two were married in September 1888. One historian says they met at a church service of the Jefferson Park Presbyterian Church in Chicago. Others say they met at a religious activity at the YMCA in Chicago. All could be correct.

Sunday was active in both organizations after he gave up heavy drinking. The story of his conversion is that he and inebriated teammates sat



Courier-News Photo by Cliff Lohs

Miriam Pearsall of West Dundee, a founder and past president for several years of the Dundee Township Historical Society, stands by the Billy Sunday plaque at Illinois 72 and Sleepy Hollow Road, West Dundee.

on a curb outside a rescue mission late one night and listened to mission workers' songs and testimonials.

Sunday walked away from his friends, the bottle and life as a baseball player to preach with a fervor uncommon in his day.

"Whatever else may be said about 'Billy' Sunday' much-discussed forms of speech, this point was clear, and denied by nobody: He made himself and his message clearly understood by all classes of people," said Ellis, his biographer.

"However much one might disagree with him, nobody failed to catch his meaning. He harnessed the common words of the street to the chariot of divine truth."

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555 Barrington Avenue
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Local History
Please keep clippings in folder
subject Sunday, Billy
date of material _____

Steve Wedemeyer Illustration

B. Wedemeyer

Firebrand minister swung from heels

Some of "Billy" Sunday's quotes recorded in Dundee Township Historical Society records and back issues of the Elgin Daily Courier and the Elgin Daily News are as follows:

- "I am preaching for the age in which I live. I am just recasting my vocabulary to suit the people of my age instead of Joshua's age."
- "Don't look as if your religion hurt you."
- "I pity anyone who can't laugh. There must be something wrong with their religion or their liver."
- "You can go to Hell as fast on Fifth Avenue as on the Bowery."
- "The fellow that says he can drink or let it alone, I've noticed never lets it alone."
- "I want to preach the gospel so plainly that men can come from the factories and not have to bring along a dictionary."
- "Holding a dollar within an inch of a man's nose sometimes will make him stone-blind to everything that is good."
- "Come on, you miserable sinners, get down on your knees, the devil has two strikes on you already."
- "Some preachers need the cushions on their chairs upholstered oftener than they need their shoes half-soled."
- "Most of the forces of Hell are led by names appearing on the church register."
- "You'll never know what a reputation is until you've lost it."

• "I'm trying to make America so dry that a man must be primed before he can spit."

• "O Lord, there are a lot of people who step up to the collection plate at church and fan. And Lord, there are always people sitting in the grandstand and calling the batter a mutt. He can't hit a thing or he can't get it over the base, or he's an ice wagon on the bases, they say. O Lord, give us some coaches out at this tabernacle so that people can be brought Home to you. Some of them are dying on second and third base.... Lord, have the people play the game of life right up to the limit so that home runs may be scored."

• "Our forefathers did not fight and die for personal license but for personal liberty bounded by laws ... As long as I am standing here on the platform I have personal liberty. I can swing my arms at will. But the minute any one else steps on the platform my personal liberty ceases. It stops just one inch from the other fellow's nose."

• "A lot of people think a man needs a new grandfather, sanitation, and a new shirt, when what he needs is a new heart."

• "Live so that when the final summons comes you will leave something more behind you than an epitaph on a tombstone or an obituary in a newspaper."

• "It is not necessary to be in a big place to do big things."

• "If you want to drive the devil out of the world, hit him with a cradle instead of a crutch."

Rosow's father owned three steam-powered threshing rigs and would thresh grain for the evangelist in the summer.

The Sunday farm passed through several ownerships through the years. The current owner is Tom Galvin of Binnie Road, West Dundee, who rents a new building on the grounds to John Cleary. Lester McManaman of West Dundee rents the land to pasture his horses.

"I was just a little kid when 'Billy' Sunday lived here," said McManaman, 80. "We lived about two miles north of the Sunday farm. I don't remember him at the farm but I saw him in West Dundee Park (the current Tower Park).

"He was quite a talker. My aunt and I went to the revival in a large tent. People came up there from Elgin and all over to see him, listen to him, and enjoy the music."

Sunday apparently held several revivals in the Elgin-West Dundee area. His documented revival at West Dundee Park was a month long.

AN ARTICLE IN the May 18, 1900, Elgin Daily Courier said in part, "Mr. Sunday is renowned for his great success in evangelistic work and it is expected that the meetings will draw large crowds and great benefit will be derived from them."

On June 15, the Daily Courier reported that Sunday was "closing his services in Dundee ... A special service for men last Sunday was well attended and many came from neighboring towns to hear Mr. Sunday's eloquent and earnest words."

Sunday was born in Ames, Iowa, in 1862, the son of a Union infantryman, Pvt. William Sunday, who died of pneumonia without seeing his son.

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