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Early days at Big Sandy were a window on Radio Church of God

If you think Roy Hammer donated the property, you're wrong

The following is an update of an article that appeared in issue No. 66 of THE JOURNAL, dated July 30, 2002.

By John Warren

BIG SANDY, Texas -- Buck Hammer, who died in 2003 at age 81, was a stalwart of the Church of God movement as we know it. Members and former members of the Worldwide Church of God (WCG) from some of its earliest days have heard of the Hammer family of Gladewater and Big Sandy, Texas.

Roy Hammer, Buck's father, who died in 1962 at age 64, first heard the founder of the Worldwide Church of God, known in those days as the Radio Church of God (RCG), over the airwaves in 1946.

As a result, Roy and Pearl Hammer and their eight children got to know RCG founder Armstrong back in the late 1940s, then invited Mr. Armstrong to East Texas for Passover services in 1951.

Mr. Armstrong sent a young RCG employee, Herman Hoeh, to stand in for him the first year, but he conducted the second Passover in the Hammer home in 1952.

But we're getting ahead of the story. Let's go back to the year the Hammer family moved from Oklahoma to Texas.

Younger elder

In 1933 Roy and Pearl Hammer moved their family from Kiefer, Okla., to Texas, where the Hammers opened a grocery store near Gladewater.

The store, at the intersection of Texas Avenue and George Richey Road in a rural area now known as Warren City, was called the Bozeman Corner Grocery Store.

At about that same time a young elder in the Oregon Conference of the Church of God -- part of a group of congregations known to this day as the Church of God Seventh Day -- was conducting tent meetings, what some might call revivals, near Salem, Ore.

Sometime in 1946 Roy Hammer, then 48, heard a man speaking on his car radio who caught his interest. At first he thought he was hearing the voice of a news broadcaster.

The voice belonged to the then-54-year-old Church of God Oregon Conference minister,

Herbert Armstrong, who only a year earlier had moved from Eugene, Ore., to Pasadena, Calif.

It wasn't long before Roy Hammer began his financial support of the Pasadena-based ministry of the Radio Church of God, even though his children chided him for sending money to someone he did not know and to a place he had never seen.

Buck Hammer, the oldest of the eight children, tried to warn his father.

"We told him, 'You are sending your money off and you don't know what is happening to it,'" Buck told *THE JOURNAL* in 2002. "One day Dad said to Mother [Roy's wife, Pearl, who lived into her 90s in Tyler, Texas], 'I'm going to Pasadena. If you want to go, you better get ready.' That was in 1948."

AC's founding

Mr. Armstrong founded Ambassador College in Pasadena on Oct. 8, 1947, with an initial enrollment of four students: Dick Armstrong, Herbert and Loma Armstrong's oldest son; Betty Bates; Raymond Cole; and Herman Hoeh.

In 1948 three more students enrolled: Kenneth Herman and brothers Marion and Raymond McNair.

A lack of adequate financing led Mr. Armstrong to limit classes the second year at the fledgling school to three days a week.

Willing to travel

Buck Hammer, who lived in retirement in Gladewater and attended services of the United Church of God until his death, in 2002 related the story of how in 1948 he had just sold a skating rink in Big Sandy and married Jean Burgess.

With no job to hold him back and a new bride who was willing to travel, the younger Mr. Hammer told his father he would drive the family to California.

So in November of that year the four made the trip to check out the Radio Church of God's headquarters.

"Dad, Mother, Jean [who died in 1995] and I went to Pasadena," Mr. Hammer said. "When we drove out there, there wasn't much going on. No one knew us, and we didn't know who they were. They were kind of standoffish."

But Mr. Armstrong walked out of the library building on campus and began conducting a campus tour for the Hammers.

"I guess someone might have checked the records and found that Dad was a pretty good contributor," said Mr. Hammer.

"Mr. Armstrong sort of took us in hand. He took us to lunch and showed us the town. He was making that '48 Chrysler of his do what I didn't know a Chrysler could do."

Mr. Hammer was impressed with Mr. Armstrong, but he was heard to comment privately to his family, "This isn't much of a college."

Learning about the feasts

After their 1948 trip, the Hammers learned about the feast days of Leviticus 23, so in 1949 Roy and Pearl Hammer traveled to Belknap Springs, Ore., for their first Feast of Tabernacles observance.

One of the Radio Church of God's doctrines was that, besides the weekly Sabbath, Christians should observe the yearly feast days. As the church grew, the site at Belknap Springs could no longer accommodate everyone who wanted to keep the festival, so Mr. Armstrong found a new site, at Siegler Springs, in Northern California.

Meanwhile, back in Gladewater the church was growing. By the spring of '51 enough church members were active in East Texas that they needed a local location for the annual Passover service. So the members met in Roy and Pearl Hammer's residence in Gladewater.

"I don't remember how many people we had that first year," Buck Hammer told this writer. "Some reports stated there were 13 at the first Passover service. The second year we had 89 people, and there were people in every room."

"By the third year we had 121 people, and we used the Gladewater elementary school for the Night to Be Much Remembered. We met in the cafeteria."

Back to Texas

At the Feast of Tabernacles in 1952 in Siegler Springs, Mr. Armstrong saw that, with continuing growth, the church would need a larger festival location for the next year.

Mr. Hammer remembered his dad having long telephone conversations with Mr. Armstrong and that Mr. Armstrong commissioned the father-son Hammer team to find a suitable facility near Gladewater for the Feast in 1953.

The Hammers located three possible sites, so Mr. Armstrong made a trip to Texas to inspect them.

One was in Longview, about 12 miles east of Gladewater. Another was near Marshall, 30 miles east of Gladewater. One was just outside of Tyler, 20 miles south of Gladewater.

Mr. Hammer recalled that Mr. Armstrong's second son, Garner Ted, who had just returned from serving in the Navy, accompanied the elder Armstrong on the trip. Garner Ted liked the Marshall property because it had a good fishing pond on it, remembered Mr. Hammer.

(The younger Mr. Armstrong would later marry Buck's sister Shirley.)

After inspecting the prospective sites, Mr. Armstrong was not happy with any of the three.

During their discussions Buck Hammer informed Mr. Armstrong that he owned property near Big Sandy, a small town in Upshur County, 10 miles west of Gladewater.

"Mr. Armstrong didn't find exactly what he was looking for, so I said, 'I will *give* you a piece of land.' We went and took a look and he said, 'Yes, this is what I like,' because he liked the rolling hills and streams."

Over the years many people have credited Buck's father, Roy Hammer, with donating the original Big Sandy property to the Radio Church of God. But that's not the way it happened. The original 10 to 15 acres that served as a Feast location and eventually the core of the Ambassador College campus came from Buck Hammer, who was 29 at the time.

Buck made the donation just after the Passover in 1952. The church bought two adjoining parcels of land that same year.

Mr. Armstrong's idea, said Mr. Hammer, was for the church to have a single location "where God had placed His name" for observing the feast days.

Thus continued the history of the Radio Church of God in East Texas.

A building of redwood

Work began in the spring of 1953 to clean up the property.

A freshwater spring in the middle of the small acreage served up drinking water for church members and laborers.

Buck Hammer was in the business of buying and selling pulpwood, the raw material for paper, at the time and also had a dump truck for dirt-hauling.

"There were vines growing up into the trees," he remembered, "and we had to cut a bunch of trees before we could get any of them to fall. One of the first things we did was put in a road."

Mr. Hammer recalled a quote from Garner Ted Armstrong describing the plans to construct the first building on the grounds, two miles east of Big Sandy on the north side of U.S. Highway 80.

"I don't know how he is going to do it," Mr. Hammer remembered the younger Mr. Armstrong saying about his dad. "He doesn't have enough money to build a decent outhouse."

With a small crew of workers that included Joe Williams, George Moss, James Barker and many church-member volunteers, Mr. Armstrong and the Hammers prepared the site as a meeting place for Feastgoers.

California architects

While the Texans were carrying out the preliminary work near Big Sandy, Mr. Armstrong was working with architects in California to design the Texas building to serve as a meeting hall.

Mr. Hammer recalled that the paid employees and volunteers had a small meeting hall in mind, but Mr. Armstrong had a bigger vision. Because he wanted a building that could be easily expanded to accommodate a growing number of Feastgoers, the architects came up with a building similar to a Quonset hut -- a structure with a semicircular arching roof -- and left the ends of the structure open to the elements.

Because Mr. Armstrong and his fellow church members believed God had placed His name at Big Sandy, many members made a pilgrimage to the facility for eight days in the spring of 1953 for Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread. The same people and more came to the Feast of Tabernacles that fall.

Festival attendance continued to increase with every spring and fall. So did the attendance at weekly Sabbath services in Big Sandy.

The site, which in those days was referred to as being "at Gladewater" even though it was closer to Big Sandy, served as the only fall-festival location for the Radio Church of God until 1960.

The literally open-ended first facility, which soon was enclosed with flat walls on its two open ends, came to be known as the Redwood Building and was used regularly for weekly Sabbath services from 1953 until 1957.

The Feast of '53

Some 700 people attended the Feast of Tabernacles in the Redwood Building in 1953.

But it wasn't long before Feast attendance overwhelmed the building, and the church had to come up with a larger facility.

Mr. Hammer remembered Mr. Armstrong saying to him: "Buck, can you cut that bank [of sandy soil] out behind the Redwood Building and we will scoot the stage back and put some more on the sides of this thing?"

Mr. Hammer told him: "Yes, sir, how much do you want to spend?"

He also told him that "that will be the ugliest building you ever saw, and besides that you would have people who couldn't see the stage."

So Mr. Armstrong decided to come up with another structure rather than enlarge the Redwood Building.

Feeding the flock

Though the Redwood Building ceased to be the main Feast tabernacle, it still served useful purposes.

Mr. Hammer remembered the days when church personnel and volunteers fed 4,700 people three meals a day from the little kitchen in the Redwood Building.

Feeding the flock got to be such a major undertaking that Mr. Armstrong decided to call on outside help.

"We hired this sort-of-famous cook from Jarvis."

Jarvis Christian College was and is a predominantly black institution of higher learning near nearby Hawkins, affiliated with Texas Christian University and dating to 1912.

The culinary artist from Jarvis "had cooked at prestigious events and may have even cooked for presidents," remembered Mr. Hammer. "She got this crew together and cooked for us. It got too big for us amateurs."

Mr. Hammer also remembered the many volunteers who assisted with the meals and cleaning up afterward.

One of the many willing RCG members was Louis Caudill, who along with his sons would wash the pots and pans by hand while another crew made use of an automatic dishwasher.

Mr. Caudill and his family would travel in from Kentucky for the feast days. Later the Caudills moved to Big Sandy, and Mr. Caudill worked for many years for Ambassador College as a mason.

A bad experience happened one year when Vernon Rogers, who lived near Wichita Falls, Texas, brought some fresh beef to the Feast.

"Mr. Rogers had butchered two or three Angus, and we packaged them up and put them in the freezer," said Mr. Hammer. "We had a big double-door freezer, and there was so much in there the air couldn't circulate and we burned the unit up. We lost somewhere around 1,000 pounds of quality meat."

Grow or else

Because of the church's seemingly unbridled growth, Mr. Armstrong decided to construct another tabernacle building, a metal-span structure, to replace the Redwood Building as the main festival tabernacle.

The large metal building, 121 feet by 250 feet, which came to be known as the Field House, was ready for use before the fall feast days in 1958.

The Redwood Building would continue as a cafeteria for Feastgoers and would eventually house the library of the Texas campus of Ambassador College.

Expanding again

The Field House was originally meant to accommodate a maximum of 5,500 people, but it reached that number the first year.

So Mr. Armstrong lengthened it by one third to accommodate more than 8,000 Feastgoers.

The church used the Field House for Feast of Tabernacles services from 1957 until the fall of 1964.

More campuses needed

Ambassador College, which Mr. Armstrong started in Pasadena in 1947, had grown enough that the founder saw the need for other campuses.

At its peak Ambassador had three campuses: one in Pasadena, begun in 1947; one in Bricket Wood, England, started in 1960; and the third on the church property at Big Sandy, dating from 1964. (The three campuses closed, respectively, in 1990, 1974 and 1997.)

By 1961 Mr. Armstrong had bought an additional 600 acres surrounding the original 10 or 15 that Buck Hammer had donated.

Roy Hammer and a crew that included his son continued year-round improvements and additions to the property to accommodate the spring and fall influxes of church members.

The elder Mr. Hammer died in 1962, and Buck took over the responsibilities of overseeing the church property.

By 1966, the second year of college classes, the church had purchased additional property and owned 1,600 acres.

Imperial Schools

The property was also the site of the church's elementary and high school known as Imperial Schools. Imperial made use of the Redwood Building and some structures on the southwest corner of the church property fronting Highway 80.

Imperial existed in Big Sandy from 1954 until 1974.

The Field House went through many remodelings and eventually boasted offices, a dining hall, classrooms, a gymnasium and locker rooms.

Because of the additional improvements to the building, it no longer could seat 8,000 for festival observances. The local congregation of the Radio Church of God (which became the

Worldwide Church of God in 1968) used the Field House for Sabbath services through 1995, except for a brief time when the gymnasium section of the building had to close for the removal of asbestos insulation during the national asbestos hysteria of the 1980s.

Largest known tent

With Ambassador College using the Field House as its main facility and festival attendance continuing to increase, Mr. Armstrong needed a new location for Feast of Tabernacles services on the Big Sandy property.

Beginning in 1965 church personnel each fall erected a giant canvas tent on the property for Feast of Tabernacles services.

A local newspaper, *The Gladewater Daily Mirror*, proclaimed in its Sept. 28, 1966, edition that the Radio Church of God expected 15,000 people to attend the Feast that year.

"Measuring 445 feet by 220 feet with six ridge poles, the tent has a seating capacity of 15,000," stated the article. "It is the largest known tent in the world."

The *Mirror* article also said: "The church holds two conventions a year -- spring and fall. There is a continuous expansion of the church and college physical property. The huge all metal building [the Field House] with no internal supports, which was built several years ago, has been outgrown by the congregation attending the annual conventions."

On the way to 100

From 1953 until 1959 Big Sandy served as the sole location for festival observance of the Radio Church of God. In 1960 the church added the first of several other sites, which by the 1980s totaled about 100 around the world.

The first after Big Sandy was at Squaw Valley, near Lake Tahoe, Calif., the site of the 1960 Winter Olympics.

Soon to follow were Jekyll Island, Ga. (with a huge tent similar to Big Sandy's); Mount Pocono, Pa.; Lake of the Ozarks, Mo.; and Wisconsin Dells, Wis.

Until the 1980s many Feastgoers at Big Sandy lived in tents and travel trailers in a large campsite on the church property known as the Piney Woods.

The Piney Woods was an 82-acre pine plantation that eventually included bathhouses with sinks, showers and toilets to accommodate campers.

Before the solid and relatively comfortable concrete-block bathhouses, the church made use of temporary buildings for showers and toilets.

The tingle of baptism

Mr. Hammer told about a baptism during a Feast observance that involved one of the older bathhouses.

"We dammed up a stream," he said, "and we were pumping water to a Quonset-hut-style bathhouse that a man had donated and we had moved onto the property. Women had facilities on one side, and men had the other. We also baptized in that building.

"Somehow there was an electrical short in the baptismal, and some people really thought they were getting the Spirit.

"It was sort of shocking anyway because that water was cold, and then they got a little tingle. It could have been serious, but nobody got hurt, just shocked a little."

Buying a booth

Before the church developed the Piney Woods campground, members camped in more-primitive campsites or in an aggregation of metal cabins the church called "booths" (because of Leviticus 23:42, KJV) that became known as Booth City.

The church added the 300 little cabins of Booth City -- some were about 10 by 12 feet, others 10 by 18 -- for the brethren to stay in during the Feast.

Ellis and Pat Stewart of Big Sandy, then of Pasadena, were some of the early festival attendees, having first come to Texas for the spring feast, the Days of Unleavened Bread, in 1956.

"Mr. Armstrong sent out a letter asking members to pledge money for what was known as the building program," remembered Mr. Stewart. "We pledged a certain amount each month, and that was used to purchase the booths. So Pat and I in effect bought one of the booths of Booth City.

"But we were not that crazy about the idea of living in a booth during the Feast. When it came time for us to have to stay in a booth, we went to Squaw Valley instead. That was 1960, I believe."

When Ambassador College opened in Big Sandy in 1964, Booth City was the only student housing and was the home of 105 students, the men residing on the north side of the collection of little white cabins, the women on the south.

Mr. Stewart remembered one year driving from California to Big Sandy and stopping in Fort Worth to rent a travel trailer in which to set up housekeeping in the Piney Woods.

During the first year the Stewarts attended in Big Sandy, their oldest child, Jonny, was only 3 weeks old, and the family stayed in an apartment in Gladewater.

"Pat thought she had to attend every service even with a 3-week-old baby," he remembered.

Imperial Schools bring growth

When Mr. Armstrong founded Imperial Schools in Big Sandy in 1954 (Imperial eventually had facilities on all three Ambassador campuses), he sent Floyd Lochner from Pasadena to supervise it.

Mr. Lochner's wife, Vernice, was the first-grade teacher and for several years the only female instructor.

"We had a lot of widows in the church," said Mr. Hammer. "They moved here where their children could attend Imperial with mostly men teachers so their children could have a masculine influence."

A pioneer Imperial instructor was Wiley Black, who also taught classes in art and literature at Ambassador.

When the Lochners later moved back to California, Guy Carnes, one of Mr. Hammer's brothers-in-law, became the school's "director," said Mr. Hammer.

200 Imperial students

As Imperial developed, the church moved its classes from the Redwood Building into prefabricated classroom buildings on the southwest corner of the grounds. The church eventually added a brick building and gymnasium to the Imperial complex, which eventually also served as classrooms for the college.

Imperial Schools, which included first grade through 12th grade, at its peak had an enrollment in Big Sandy of almost 200 students.

Imperial controversy

Ron Avey of Big Sandy attended Imperial from the seventh grade, beginning in 1964, until the school graduated him in 1969 with a class of 16 seniors.

"There is a lot of controversy over Imperial School," said Mr. Avey, "but I would do it again. I feel like I was given a first-class education. I remember Mr. [Norvel] Pyle giving us a current-events quiz every day."

Mr. Pyle was a teacher for many years at Imperial and served as the school's principal. Mr. Pyle's widow, Alvah, lived in Big Sandy until her death, in 2013.

Imperial closed its doors in Big Sandy in 1974.

First-class school with a problem

Mr. Stewart, who moved to Big Sandy as a church employee in 1965, had three children who

attended Imperial. He agreed with Mr. Avey that academically the school was "first class." Yet Imperial had a problem, Mr. Stewart believes.

"Like so many organizations, politics created a caste system for many of the students," he said.

In other words, he said, the school administration treated some students -- children of church elders and college-faculty members -- better than others.

Willing to sacrifice

Wiley Black, now in his 90s and living in a residence for retirees in Longview, taught at Imperial after attending the Feast in Big Sandy.

"Dr. Lochner approached me during the Feast and asked me if I would stay and teach at Imperial," remembered Mr. Black.

"That was hard because my wife [Suzanne] and I had just gotten married, and all we had with us was some of our clothes and a few other things.

"I began teaching in 1957 or 1958. At that time the school was very small, and I taught a variety of subjects including math, English and literature."

Mr. Black continued at Imperial until it closed. He said the pay wasn't adequate but he was willing to sacrifice because he thought the school served a good purpose.

Many of his former students have maintained contact with him, he said, and he is happy he could be a positive influence on them.

Mr. Black also gave private art lessons to Imperial students and is proud that some of his students have made a lifelong profession of art or photography.

Mr. Black remembers some of the instructors at Imperial when he started teaching: the Lochners, Mr. Pyle, Cecil Reese and Wilma Taylor.

Avoiding vaccinations

Jack and Norene Martz of Big Sandy made the decision in 1958 to move their family from Lockesburg, Ark., to Big Sandy so their five children could attend the school.

"The requirement in Arkansas to have your kids vaccinated was the main factor" in the Martzes' move, Mr. Martz said.

Many church members did not allow their children to be immunized because of the church's teaching on health, doctors and healing.

Mr. Martz became an employee of the church in 1962. His first job was helping to develop a lake on the property that became known as Lake Loma in honor of Mr. Armstrong's first wife

(who died in 1967). Mr. Martz continued to work for the church and college until 1977.

Mr. Martz said his children have fond memories of their days at Imperial.

"There were problems," he said, "but you are going to have some problems no matter where you go."

Folding up the big tent

Festival attendance continued to grow during the 1960s. Even with multiple Feast sites in several countries, the feast days continued to attract capacity crowds to the Big Sandy grounds.

Besides deciding to sponsor more than one Feast of Tabernacles location, in the 1960s Mr. Armstrong made the decision to construct tabernacle buildings around the United States.

The church constructed a total of four, in Big Sandy, Mount Pocono, Wisconsin Dells and Lake of the Ozarks.

After making use of the big-top tent at Big Sandy for four years, the church constructed a massive metal tabernacle building near Booth City. Feastgoers first flocked into the structure in 1969.

By this time several years had passed since the last centralized observance of the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Now church members observed the Unleavened Bread spring festival in their home areas and traveled to centralized locations only for the fall (in the northern hemisphere) Feast of Tabernacles.

Seating 16,000

The new Feast building at Big Sandy, which came to be known as the Convention Center, was 300 by 320 feet (96,000 square feet) and could seat around 16,000 (about the same capacity as the tent's).

"One year we had over 15,000 people in attendance in the Convention Center," said Mr. Hammer. "We had over 9,000 in the campgrounds that year," with the rest staying in hotels, motels and private residences.

The Convention Center also served the Big Sandy congregation for weekly Sabbath services in the 1980s while crews labored to remove asbestos from the walls of the Field House.

In the 20 years from 1951 until 1971, festival attendance had jumped from the original 13 who met in the Hammer home for Passover to more than 15,000 who made Big Sandy their temporary home for eight days during the Feast of Tabernacles.

TO BE CONTINUED

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