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BIG SANDY, Texas -- *JOURNAL* writer John Warren is hot on the history trail again.

The focus of his second monthly installment is a little softer. Much of the narrative does concern the Big Sandy area, but this time the anecdotes and photos also come from Oregon, California and England.

Feasts in Oregon and East Texas set pace for early RCG

The following is an update of an article that appeared in issue No. 67 of THE JOURNAL, dated Aug. 30, 2002. This article is the second in a series.

By John Warren

BIG SANDY, Texas -- Last month we wrote about the growth of the Radio Church of God in East Texas from its beginnings in the early 1950s up until the early 1970s.

We chronicled the church in this area beginning with the 13 people who observed that first Passover and Days of Unleavened Bread at the Roy Hammer residence near Gladewater in 1951.

We saw the founding of Imperial Schools near Big Sandy in 1954 and the opening on the same property of Ambassador College in 1964.

Under the spreading oak tree

The college campus at Big Sandy had a major impact on church growth in East Texas, but an earlier major factor was Radio/Worldwide Church of God founder Herbert W. Armstrong's decision in 1952 to develop the church property as a Feast of Tabernacles site for the fall of 1953.

In this article we focus on what Sabbath and Feast services were like in those early days and the challenges that confronted church members.

Several people who attended festival and church services in the 1940s and '50s provided *THE JOURNAL* with their remembrances for this article in interviews in 2002.

Buck Hammer of Gladewater, who died in 2003, remembered the first church service on the property two miles east of Big Sandy on U.S. Highway 80. This was in 1952 during the spring feast, with services that year taking place at the Hammer home near Gladewater.

After discussions with Mr. Armstrong, founder of what was then called the Radio Church of God, about the need for a larger facility for observing the Feast of Tabernacles later that year, a group traveled from Gladewater to the unimproved Big Sandy property one afternoon during the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Compared with services in later years in air-conditioned buildings, that first meeting was rather primitive.

"Mr. Armstrong stood under an oak tree," remembered Mr. Hammer. "There was sort of a natural amphitheater on a hillside near the spring [a spring near the site on which Mr. Armstrong would later oversee the construction of the Redwood Building]. The audience sat on the ground. It wasn't a real sermon; it was more like he was talking about the work [of the church]."

Mr. Hammer didn't remember all who were there, but he did remember that Joe and Dorothy Williams and Wid Boyce sat in the group.

Mr. Armstrong conducted the Passover service itself and most daily meetings at the Hammer house back at Gladewater.

Minnie Humphreys of Mineola, Texas, was one of those in attendance.

Mr. Armstrong baptized Mrs. Humphreys and her husband, Roy (who died in 1975), along with Freia Friddle (who became Freia Smith) shortly after the spring festival. The baptism took place in Big Sandy Lake (which was also sometimes called Evermans' Lake) on June 21, 1952.

Mrs. Humphreys described how, after listening to Mr. Armstrong on his radio broadcast, he put the Humphreyses in contact with Roy and Pearl Hammer in Texas.

"We were tithing to the Radio Church of God and Mr. Armstrong wrote us a letter inviting us to contact the Hammers," said Mrs. Humphreys. "We called over there and Mrs. Hammer invited us to come for a visit. We went there on the Sabbath, and the house was filled with people."

Mrs. Humphreys described those early Sabbath meetings:

"The Hammers had been out there [to Pasadena], so we would ask them a lot of questions. There was no preaching at that time. Roy Hammer would just talk to us. We would ask him a lot of questions."

Dorothy Williams of Big Sandy recited her memories of coming into contact with the Radio Church of God. At the time she and her husband, Joe, and their four children lived near Temple, Texas. After listening to Mr. Armstrong on the radio, Mrs. Williams wrote to church headquarters.

"I would bombard Mrs. Armstrong with questions," Mrs. Williams, who was 84 at the time of this interview, told *THE JOURNAL*.

She also requested a visit from church representatives, and in the summer of 1949 two young men traveled from Southern California to the Williams home in Temple for a visit.

"Raymond Cole and Raymond McNair came to our house way out in the country," she

remembered. "We kept them up until 3 in the morning asking questions, so they spent the night. We made a pallet for them on the porch."

The Williamses were farmers who raised hogs and chickens. Like many rural people in the 1940s, their house had no electricity or plumbing.

During the Pasadena men's visit, they encouraged Mrs. Williams to attend the Feast of Tabernacles at the RCG's only Feast site, at Belknap Springs, Ore.

Her husband was still a smoker at the time, so the church representatives did not think he was ready to attend that Feast. She made the trip by train from San Antonio, Texas, to Los Angeles.

"I had never been out of the state," she said.

Mrs. Williams, who died in 2005, remembered the breathtakingly beautiful Feast site at Belknap Springs overlooking the majestic McKenzie River.

Living waters

"Where church services were held you could look out on the river," she said. "It was just so beautiful."

A fond memory for Mrs. Williams was seeing a young mother, Anne Elliott, holding her baby in a rocking chair during services.

"Things were a lot more informal then," said Mrs. Williams. "There was nothing disrespectful, just more relaxed. Like many other Church of God old-timers, Mrs. Williams remembered something else about church and festival services in those days.

"I just know they were long," she said. "We had services in the morning and again in the afternoon. They just went on and on and on. I'm not complaining because we learned a lot of truth. It was the truth then, it is the truth today, and it will be the truth when Christ returns. We learned about salvation."

Mrs. Williams, who grew up as a Baptist, remembered begging Mr. Armstrong to baptize her.

"I just wanted to be sure," she said. "But Mr. Armstrong said, 'No, you've already been immersed.' He never rebaptized me, but he did lay hands on me in 1949."

'We went berserk'

In 1952 the Williamses heard from Mr. Armstrong of his plans to start a congregation at the Hammer residence near Gladewater. They moved from Temple to Big Sandy in January 1953 so they could be near other church members and attend weekly services.

Mrs. Williams recalled her excitement at the prospect.

"We heard Mr. Armstrong say there was going to be a church here. We went berserk. We were so thrilled to have a church. We just got up and moved up here."

Mr. Williams went to work on the campus in the summer of 1953 helping to clear the property up.

The fledging congregation met at the Hammers' until Mr. Armstrong had the Redwood Building built. The little group wanted a small building that would meet the needs of the local members. Mr. Armstrong saw the need for a tabernacle building that would serve the entire church, so he decided to construct a building on the property that would hold the total church membership at the spring and fall festivals.

Some who attended that first Feast of Tabernacles after the construction of the Redwood Building have vivid memories of that observance. Because the Quonset-hut-style structure did not have walls on the end and no heated or refrigerated air, the attendees were exposed to the elements.

That fall the elements brought frigid temperatures.

"We would take our army blankets with us and we would all wrap up," Mrs. Humphreys said. "We would almost freeze."

On another occasion "we lost electricity, and the lights went out while Mr. Armstrong was preaching so everyone took their chairs outside in the sun and Mr. Armstrong finished speaking without a microphone."

Mrs. Humphreys, who died at age 91 in 2002, remembered a sometimes-grueling schedule.

"All through all eight days we had two services. Everyone was worn out by the end of the day."

Learning something new

Mr. Hammer also remembered the long services.

"During those days we were having some services go four hours," he said. "It was a little different then because we were learning something new. We were meeting in the Redwood Building and the ends were still open. We put tar paper on the ends to try to slow the wind down as it came whistling through."

Mr. Hammer specifically remembered one speaker with obviously healthy lungs.

"Preaching had been going on for about two hours one afternoon and the minister said, 'And in closing,' and went another 45 minutes.

"I decided to run to pick up the meat for the evening meal. I had the meat at the locker plant in Gladewater. I went and got back and he was still preaching. He said, 'And in closing,' and went

another 30 minutes.

"Miss Lola was sitting on the back row. She stood up and said, '... Someone is going to have to choke him off!' I thought that was pretty funny."

First pastor

Mrs. Williams told about the first pastor, Marion McNair, to serve in what was to become known as the Big Sandy congregation.

"Marion and DeLoyce McNair came first," she said. "They were also the first teachers at Imperial. The [Floyd] Lochners came after the McNairs."

In 1952, at the second Passover at the Hammer home, among those in attendance were two young native East Texans, James "Jimmy" Friddle and Dean Blackwell.

"They got recruited to attend Ambassador," remembered Mr. Hammer.

After their tenure at AC, both men returned to East Texas and served the congregation they first attended.

"The first one they sent from Pasadena [to Big Sandy] was Marion McNair," said Mr. Hammer. "That summer they sent Dean Blackwell as an assistant while he was still a student at Ambassador. Boy, did we get the scriptures. He didn't say much that wasn't straight out of the Scripture. I don't think he stayed but through the summertime."

Later replacing Mr. McNair as Big Sandy pastor was Raymond Cole. Raymond and Myra Cole served the congregation for a short time, said Mr. Hammer, and were replaced by James and Marjorie Friddle in September 1955.

Wayne Cole, now of Tyler, Texas, younger brother of the second pastor, told *THE JOURNAL*:

"When Raymond was here he did a lot of work to develop the library. Molly Hammer [now Mrs. David Antion] helped, and a lot of people donated books."

Readers of last month's church-history article in *THE JOURNAL* will remember that Imperial Schools opened in Big Sandy in 1954, with the Redwood Building providing classrooms and a library for the elementary and high school.

Mr. and Mrs. Friddle served the Big Sandy church from 1955 until June 1957.

Unordained pastor

On a 40th-anniversary videotape produced for the Big Sandy congregation of the Worldwide Church of God in 1993, Mr. Friddle reminisced.

"After Marjorie and I were married," he said, "we were sent to our first pastorate of the Radio

Church of God in Gladewater, Texas. I had quite a shock when we arrived in Gladewater. Mr. Raymond Cole broke me in quickly as he assigned me to give the Bible study and the sermon on the Sabbath the first week we arrived."

Mr. Cole assisted Mr. Friddle on one church-member visit, "then I was on my own, fresh out of college and green as grass."

Mr. Friddle worked under Mr. Lochner at Imperial for part of each workday and as church pastor for the rest of the time.

"Mr. Cole left me to pastor the church, but as yet I was not ordained."

Mr. Hammer remembered that with the rapid growth of the Radio Church of God in the 1950s and 1960s came a desperate shortage of ministers.

"In those days," he said, "it was get them graduated, get them married, give them a car, give them a church, and go get 'em, boys."

Half and half

The next pastor to arrive in the area was David Jon Hill, who served here for a short time.

Kenneth Swisher, who replaced Mr. Hill in 1957, told *THE JOURNAL*:

"Jon Hill came in temporarily after Jimmy Friddle transferred out. He pastored and taught at Imperial School. I was sent here in 1957, and this was the last place a minister wanted to come. There were problems here. Half the congregation was for Marion McNair, and the other half wasn't."

Mr. Swisher at the time of this interview was living in retirement in Tyler after serving in the ministry of the Radio and Worldwide Church of God until 1996.

Mr. Swisher remembered Guy Carnes coming to Big Sandy the same year he arrived to begin serving as principal at Imperial.

Mr. Lochner returned to Pasadena, where he continued to serve as superintendent of schools for the California and Texas Imperial campuses.

Mr. Swisher enrolled in Ambassador College after his discharge from the U.S. Army in August 1952. He had served his country as a radio technician in Korea. He attended his first Feast of Tabernacles at the Big Sandy site that same fall. Little did he know that five years later, after his graduation, he would return as church pastor.

Although he had taught at Imperial in Pasadena, Mr. Swisher did not teach when he came to Big Sandy. The Radio Church of God was growing so rapidly he was busy serving the scattered brethren across Texas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and even states further east.

"We were the easternmost church at that time," he remembered. "If someone east of Big Sandy needed a minister, I was the closest one."

Mr. Swisher was a "local elder," the lowest ministerial rank, during his early assignments.

That changed suddenly when a situation arose in which the church officially decided that a pregnant but unmarried young woman from Kilgore, 20 miles from Big Sandy, should get married.

After consulting with Mr. Armstrong and Mr. Cole about the situation, Mr. Cole told Mr. Swisher to perform the wedding.

"I told them I couldn't do the wedding because it would not be legal," said Mr. Swisher. "Mr. Armstrong said, 'What? We sent him down there as pastor and he's not ordained?' That is how I got ordained as a preaching elder."

Juneteenth, a Texas tradition

Mr. Swisher drove a red and white '54 Pontiac he had bought from Marvin Lindsey in Pasadena to his new job assignment. He remembered needing to have some work done on the car, so he took it to the J.O. Williams dealership in Gladewater.

"Mr. Williams said we can't work on your car today; this is Juneteenth," Mr. Swisher said. "I didn't know what that was, and he said to me, 'You're a damn Yankee, aren't you?'"

Juneteenth is June 19, the anniversary of the day on which slaves in Texas after the American Civil War learned of President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation. Mr. Swisher, having grown up in Illinois, had never heard of Juneteenth.

Many people who remember the 1950s and 1960s will recall the separate white and black cultures of those days. Mr. Swisher remembered three restrooms (marked "Men," "Women" and "Colored") in every gas station and two water fountains (designated "White" and "Colored").

Mr. Swisher mentioned the difficulty of visiting with black Radio Church of God members in their homes.

Because of sensitivities in East Texas concerning anything to do with race, "when I visited black brethren, I wanted a black minister to go with me," he said.

"I asked Harold Jackson [a black RCG pastor] to come down from Chicago and we would visit all the black brethren."

But racial sensitivities even meant a white person could get in trouble with local law enforcers if he were seen riding in a car with a black person.

So "we hatched this plan that Mr. Jackson would drive and act like the chauffeur and I would sit in the back seat," said Mr. Swisher.

"In those days the motels were segregated, and he would drop me off and he would drive to another fleabag motel. In the morning he would come back and pick me up. He would get out and open the door for me.

"We got away with that all the way across Arkansas and into Louisiana until we got to Shreveport. Some policeman spotted us there and he tailed us all the way to the city limit. Mr. Jackson and I did a lot of praying. If someone had caught on, we could have been in big trouble."

Mr. Swisher fondly remembered Mr. Jackson, the first black minister ordained in the Radio/Worldwide Church of God, eventually rising to the rank of evangelist. Mr. Jackson died in 1991.

"What a fantastic guy he was."

Mr. Swisher related a story about a black minister at a "ministerial refresher program" of the Worldwide Church of God who commented in later years that he couldn't believe the church had practiced racial segregation at one time.

Mr. Swisher told him: "I did that. I had Mr. Armstrong's approval. I told him what the situation was here, and he backed me up on that. At the Feast we had people coming in off the street, and we had to protect our church members. We had to be wise as serpents and harmless as doves."

Church members who attended Feast of Tabernacles observances at Big Sandy in the old days will remember that in the first metal tabernacle building and in the big tent until 1968 ushers would designate separate sections of folding chairs for black church members. In the Piney Woods campground on the church property, the captains of 10 and captains of 100, etc., would reserve separate sections for the black brethren.

In the jailhouse then

Events in the church in the early days of Big Sandy conspired at one point to land Mr. Swisher and Mr. Hammer in the local clink.

"Some woman from Louisiana came here, obviously against her husband's will, to observe the Feast," explained Mr. Swisher. "He showed up during the Feast with a Louisiana deputy sheriff" looking for the man's wife.

But "I wouldn't help them locate his wife," and "I didn't know where the woman was camping," said Mr. Swisher. "This was the spring holy days, and we were not as organized for the spring feast as we were for the Feast of Tabernacles."

The next thing Mr. Swisher knew, the Upshur County sheriff and a deputy were knocking on Mr. Swisher's door in Gladewater.

"They took me to jail. I had four kids, and Bev was in the back room nursing the baby. I never had a chance to tell her what was happening.

"The kids ran to her and said, 'A man with a big gun came and took Daddy.'

"They put me in the car, and there was Buck Hammer and Tom Hamon, a church member from Louisiana. We spent part of the night in jail."

(The lawmen hauled Mr. Hamon in as well as Mr. Hammer and Mr. Swisher because, said Mr. Swisher, Mr. Hamon was outspoken to the sheriff in his opinion of the sheriff's actions that day.)

With the concerted efforts of Mr. Hammer and an attorney, the sheriff released Mr. Hammer, Mr. Hamon and Mr. Swisher from custody that night.

But Mr. Swisher still had vivid recollections of the accommodations at the jail in Gilmer.

"They put me in one cell and Buck was in the one next to me. There was something wrong with the plumbing because when I would flush the toilet in my cell it would come up in his, and when Buck flushed his it would come up in mine."

Mr. Hammer also remembered.

"That jail had problems," he said. "They brought us food on trays that looked like they had fed dogs with. I decided to fast. I didn't eat anything while I was there."

Both men said they thought more was going on than met the eye. They sensed what they described later as religious animosity and jealousy in that and other situations.

"The judge was a Church of Christ minister and he hated us with a purple passion," said Mr. Swisher.

Pardon his French

Since Upshur County, including Big Sandy, was "dry" -- that is, alcohol sales and consumption were prohibited by law -- Mr. Swisher would seek permission from the U.S. Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms Commission (ATF) to serve wine at Passover services and on the Night to Be Much Observed.

Mr. Swisher would make sure the ATF paperwork was in order each year before the observances.

An ATF officer confided in Mr. Swisher one year that local law enforcers had come to him

privately and asked him to participate on a "raid" on the church's property near Big Sandy.

"That would have been on Passover or the Night to Be Much Observed," said Mr. Swisher. "Can you imagine the commotion that would have caused? We had a good relationship with that ATF official, and he knew we had everything in order. He told me, 'Pardon my French, but I told them to go straight to hell.'"

Mr. Swisher remembered another incident involving East Texans opposed to the consumption of alcohol.

"We had one motel owner that called us after about 30 or 40 of our people had a party one night. He went out and counted the beer bottles. That was a problem to him."

Almost passed out

Mr. Swisher remembered that, because of tight church finances, the going could get rough at times for church employees. Sometimes they might go for weeks at a time without a paycheck.

Sometimes, because of finances, Ambassador College back in Pasadena could not afford to hold classes the customary five days a week.

Mr. Swisher did what he could to make ends meet in East Texas. One thing he did was work on his own car.

"We had a church member in Canton, Texas, Mr. Leon Pierce, who had a garage," he said. "He told everyone he came in contact with about the church. Melven Allen was working for him at that time.

(Mr. Allen, who now lives in Big Sandy, worked for many years in the transportation department at Ambassador in Big Sandy.)

"I went over there one day and was under my car when Mr. Allen came in," said Mr. Swisher. "All he saw was my feet. After I slid out from under the car Mr. Pierce said, 'I'd like for you to meet our pastor.' Mr. Allen almost passed out. He didn't expect a pastor to be working on his own car."

Dorothy Williams, whose husband, Joe, was a church employee, could remember those lean days as well.

Weeks without pay

"We went for weeks without a paycheck," she said. "We owed every ma-and-pa store in the area. If it hadn't been for Buck [Hammer], I don't think we would have made it. We eventually did get paid, but we were very thankful for all the grocery stores that gave us credit."

Mr. Hammer raised cattle, had a greenhouse and raised tomatoes and other vegetables. As

many old-timers will recall, the church operated a farm on its property that predated the opening of the college.

The farm developed to include a dairy operation, beef cattle, and fruit, vegetable, egg and forage production.

When Mr. Hammer became full-time supervisor of the church's buildings and grounds on his father's death in 1962, the church hired Dale Schurter to oversee the farm.

Feeding the early flock

Mr. Swisher talked about his sermons in the early days.

"My sermons then would have been on prophecy, Christian living, Sabbath-keeping and the law," he said. "I was a big preacher of the law.

"We had Imperial School here, so some of the sermons would be presented to deal with some of the difficulties going on there."

Mr. Hammer recalled two issues from the early days.

"In those days we had Church of Christ women coming in with no makeup and hair in a bun, and we had Methodist women coming in all painted up with all kinds of hairdos.

"The women kept going to Mr. Armstrong complaining about the others. He decided to form a committee to look into the subject of makeup."

Mr. Hammer said that, because of the mix of men Mr. Armstrong chose for the committee, he could easily predict what Mr. Armstrong's decision regarding makeup would be.

"All I had to do was look at their wives," said Mr. Hammer.

As many will remember, the Radio Church of God and Worldwide Church of God banned women's cosmetics in the 1950s and 1960s (and during a separate span in the 1970s).

Before Mr. Armstrong's makeup decision, said Mr. Hammer, a local minister "didn't know what he would be preaching from one week to the next. We never knew if we've got makeup, it's okay, or if it was all off."

Another issue was fashion of clothes, especially women's.

Darned if you do

"We had a deal about women wearing slacks after Mr. Swisher came," said Mr. Hammer. "This had to do with women wanting to dress like men."

In one service Mr. Hammer remembered Mr. Swisher talking about women who wore "shorts."

"He said, 'Some of you are too fat, so you don't look good and ought not to be doing that,'" Mr. Hammer remembered Mr. Swisher saying. "'Some of you are so skinny that you don't look good in them. Some of you really look good in them and you *definitely* shouldn't be wearing them.'"

Even though Mr. Hammer remembered humorous and some would say ridiculous events and decisions, he was thankful, he said, for all he learned during the early years.

"Most of us didn't know much, but I think we knew enough to realize this [the Radio Church of God] was the right way."

The church's message included freely given advice on health matters, including specifics of diet, such as a general prohibition on white bread and white sugar.

"We learned a lot, and back then we didn't have many people sick," said Mr. Hammer. "I remember the first man who died. I didn't think anyone in the church was going to die, and for a lot of years nobody did," but "then a man out in New Mexico had a heart attack and died."

Mr. Hammer said that because church members "knew we were the temple of the Holy Spirit" they wanted to "take care" of the temple by eating to stay healthy.

One-man ministry

Myra Cole of Eugene, Ore., widow of Raymond Cole (who died in September 2001), talked to this writer of some of her memories of the early days in Big Sandy.

"What services were like depended on if there was anyone from the college in Pasadena available to give a sermonette," she said.

In the early days of the Radio Church of God, only one man was available to give the sermon in each congregation. As more students attended Ambassador, the men would emerge after graduation with training in how to give speeches and start with presentations of 10 to 15 minutes each that came to be called sermonettes.

"I enjoyed every area we lived in," said Mrs. Cole. "We moved a lot in those days. We were in and out of Big Sandy and Pasadena a lot. During our stays in East Texas we lived in Big Sandy, Longview and Gladewater. Our youngest daughter was born in Big Sandy."

The only thing Mrs. Cole remembered that she didn't like about Big Sandy was the summer heat.

"It would get to 120 degrees. I would go to the ice store and buy ice and drink iced tea all day just like the natives."

CG7 influence

Wayne Cole, who entered Ambassador in Pasadena in 1950 and was graduated in 1954,

remembers the influence of Mr. Armstrong's former church association.

"When Mr. Armstrong moved from Eugene to Pasadena he still had the influence of the Church of God (Seventh Day)," said Mr. Cole. For example, "he still conducted Sabbath school at that time."

Ambassador student Herman Hoeh apparently didn't like the concept of Sabbath school, said Mr. Cole, so he "went to Mr. Armstrong and said, 'It is the parents' responsibility to teach their children.' He [Mr. Armstrong] changed the church format then [eliminating Sabbath schools], I think in 1949."

The usual church format at that time was to begin church services with two songs, the opening prayer, announcements, another song, special music (if available), a sermon, a closing song and a closing prayer.

"I think it was in 1950 sermonettes were added," said Mr. Cole. "They were to be short topics. They were not intended to be sermons cut down. Sermonettes were a tool to train young [AC] students."

The format might vary for sermons on feast days, said Mr. Cole. Instead of one sermon, the brethren might hear two sermons of about 50 minutes each.

The pioneers of the Radio Church of God in Texas and elsewhere worked through some hard times and saw the Big Sandy congregation grow steadily through the years.

From the humble beginnings around a kitchen table to meetings under an oak tree to eventually gaining use of modern facilities and serving thousands of Church of God members, these stalwarts helped build a congregation, Feast of Tabernacles site, private school and college.

The facility at Big Sandy flourished for many years and eventually became known as a second headquarters of the Worldwide Church of God.

TO BE CONTINUED