

History of St. James' Episcopal Church **By Thelma McClain, Asst. Lib., Ret.**

La Grange was established as a town by the Republic of Texas in 1838. Just three years later the first missionary of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas, The Rt. Rev. George Freeman, visited the little town on the Colorado on his way to Austin. He reported it to be a potential mission site.

In December of 1848, the Rev. Charles Gillett conducted the first Episcopal service in the courthouse, where religious services were held at the time. The Rev. Edward Fontaine conducted the first Episcopal baptism in the home of Mrs. Julia Sinks, the candidates being Mrs. Sinks and her children. This lady became a very important person in Texas history writing many articles and the book *Chronicles of Fayette*. She also had the distinction of being the first person confirmed in La Grange, Bishop Freeman officiating.

The St. James' Parish was organized in 1855. It was first named "Trinity Church," but as there were already so many churches of that name in the diocese, it was changed to St. James'. Monthly services were conducted in Union Church, the Rev. Hannibal N. Pratt officiating. This young minister left colorful and poignant memoirs of his struggles to hold a parish together in the face of conflicting social forces of the time. The urge to move on westward was at its height and Mr. Pratt never knew which of his parishioners would be there on his next visit. His writings also tell of his work among the 2, 135 slaves who lived in the area, several of whom became candidates for baptism.

This dedicated young minister, whose health was always fragile, literally gave his life to the service of God, ministering to a ninety-mile wide parish in all kinds of weather, traveling in a rough stagecoach. His death came not long before Christmas in 1857.

Over the next years, most of the church activity was centered in the Sunday School, services being held in private homes by the women of the church. Missionary visits were infrequent, but records indicate attendance was large and enthusiastic for these meetings. There are no reports of the years of the Civil War, but in 1866 the Rev. J.W. Tays became the missionary for St. James'. He was much impressed by what he described as "a beautiful little town," and seems to have been the first to work actively for the building of an edifice for the parish. Under his ministry communicant numbers increased, the Sunday School flourished, and a new organ and organized choir added much to the services. With the help of the churchwomen, fundraising activities continued.

In 1867 two events occurred which drastically affected the Parish: Mr. Tays was reassigned to Indianola, Texas, and a yellow fever epidemic struck the area with devastating results. It took the lives of half of St. James' membership, including one of the wardens, Judge Benjamin Shropshire. His widow, Georgiana, donated in his memory some property which later became the site for the present church.

The church had barely recovered from the tragedy of yellow fever when the Colorado River flooded the town. As one historian noted, "All prospects seemed blighted," but

Georgiana Shropshire was not to be defeated by events. In 1869 she traveled all the way to New York City, a formidable journey in those days, and obtained donations in the amount of \$800. With this money a building on the corner of Walnut and Jefferson was purchased and served as the Church for the next 20 years. Mrs. Shropshire taught Sunday School there until her death in 1877.

In 1876 there arrived in the parish a young man who was to lead St. James' into its most significant period thus far, the Rev. William George Washington Smith. For five years he fulfilled the duties of a missionary for the area. In 1881, he became full-time rector, committed to building a strong church in the face of many obstacles.

Determined to go ahead with a church building program, Smith made trips back east and raised money for that purpose. It is evident he was a young man of wide acquaintance among persons of influence and capabilities, for he was able to obtain the services of a leading architectural firm in New York to design St. James'. Richard Upjohn had designed another Episcopal Church in Texas, St. Marks', in San Antonio, as well as the outstanding example of Gothic Revival, Trinity Church, Wall Street. His son, Richard Micell Upjohn, worked out a plan for St. James' in the Queen Anne style. One architectural historian, John Ferguson, has declared, "The vitality of Upjohn's design made it a standout in Texas and, indeed, in the entire South." Subsequent additions of a parish hall, offices, and Sunday School rooms have maintained the integrity of the original design.

Mr. Smith lent his own considerable talent to fashioning the altar, pulpit, chancel railings and bishop's chair, working closely with a local carpenter, Frank Reichert, to design pews. He also selected designs for the stained glass windows, which were made in Europe. The presence of these beautiful windows is somewhat miraculous, as the ship carrying them to America was battered by a fierce hurricane, yet every piece of the windows arrived in perfect condition. The largest was dedicated to the memory of Georgiana Shropshire.

It has been said that the spectacular system of wood trusses supporting the nave roof were inspired by the hulls of ships sailing the Sea of Galilee in the days of Christ's earthly ministry. These beautiful appointments, imbued with the memory of those who have worshipped here for more than a hundred years, make St. James' a treasure for its own communicants and for Episcopalians everywhere. In 1975 it was added to the National Register of Historic Places.

Mr. Smith departed the parish in 1891, and the church's activity was mainly limited to Sunday School, kept flourishing by the women of the church.

It was not until the Rev. J. Cross Gray came in 1917 that full services were again available. The beautiful building had sunk into deplorable condition: dirt has sifted in, covering floor and pews. Under Mr. Gray's guidance the church was thoroughly cleaned and repainted, and an organ and choir provided. A lengthy article in the *Houston Daily Post* of February 11, 1918, termed its restoration "a wonderful resurrection."

Mr. Gray remained for two years only, and another period of relative inactivity ensued, during which missionaries came occasionally to conduct services. Again the churchwomen, who were now organized into the Women's Guild, raised money and directed the care of the church.

During the years of the Depression, followed immediately by World War II, religious institutions did not receive adequate emphasis. It was not until 1951 that the Rev. Arthur Edmonds became the first resident clergyman since 1919. Even though his death occurred a year later, overall conditions in parish life insured that a new rector, Arthur Lockhart, was immediately appointed. Under his leadership was begun a half century of continuing church development.

St. James' has been blessed with a steady succession of full time devoted rectors who have guided the church into a vital program for a parish which, like the world around it, has undergone so many changes in social and educational levels. These changes had resulted in society's becoming increasingly more troubled and in need of many kinds of help. Social agencies and religious groups sought more effective ways to meet these needs.

In the 1950's the St. James' leadership began a greatly expanded building program, not only in the physical plant but also in its spiritual and educational services. A Parish Hall was built, along with Sunday School rooms, and an active education program implemented. Office space was added. A rectory was built on land donated by the Logan family in memory of John Logan, Sr., who had given outstanding service to the parish.

St. James' has been fortunate to have the support of full vestry memberships over the last half century. Valued assistance in carrying out the expanded program has been given by the Episcopal Church Women (ECW), The Men's Club, the Episcopal Youth Commission (EYC) and Daughters of the King.

Service to the larger community has been for some time an established policy of St. James', especially cooperation with other denominations in meeting spiritual and human needs. Combined services are held at Ascensiontide and Thanksgiving as well as on other occasions as seem appropriate. The Second Chance Emporium, a resale shop that replaces one originally operated by the women of St. James', is much appreciated by the townspeople and is operated by volunteers from a number of churches. The food service A.M.E.N. is assisted by St. James'. Meeting space is provided for Alcoholics Anonymous and Al Anon. The ECW, Men's Club and EYC have all carried our projects that benefit individuals and groups with various needs.

St. James' has supported one of the most innovative policies of the centuries in the Episcopal Church – admission of women to the priesthood. In 1992, the Vestry called the Rev. Dena Harrison to be Rector of St. James'. The Rev. Anne Knight Hoey came to lead the church in 1997.

When looking back over the 150 years of St. James' history, the contribution made by churchwomen is indeed remarkable. Even when other religious activity was at a standstill, they kept on with their Sunday Schools. Because of their devotion, the parish children needed not grow up without the certainty of God's love and knowledge of Christ's teachings.

Deep Gratitude is felt for the endurance and determination of those servants of God who faced such hardships of many kinds to take the Word into rough frontiers. Bravery of a new kind is needed now by church leadership in this day of complex social conditions. To paraphrase the baptismal covenant, "We will, with God's help."