



DALLAS COUNTY
HISTORICAL COMMISSION

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Tyler Street Methodist Church

10th Street Churches: Believe it Or Not By Fred Durham

Question: In the first half of the 20th Century, what street held the record for having more churches per mile than any other street in the world? According to “Ripley’s Believe It Or Not,” it was 10th Street in the North Oak Cliff neighborhood of Dallas! In just a little over three miles, twenty-eight churches once found their homes, eighteen of them for the better part of the century. They were not all small churches either; by 1950, the total number of those who worshipped in them topped 20,000. Cliff Temple Baptist alone had over 5,000 members, and Tyler Street Methodist, with just over 4,000, had the second-largest Sunday School program in all of Methodism’s 40,000 congregations.

The congregations were diverse. Anchoring 10th Street on the east were four strong African American congregations, the oldest (Elizabeth Chapel CME, Great El Bethel Baptist, Antioch Baptist, and Smith Chapel AME) dating to the 1890s. To the west were 14 Anglo congregations which included five Baptist churches, two Methodist ones, two Presbyterian, one Episcopal, one Disciples of Christ, one Church of Christ, one Nazarene, and even one Church of Christ Scientist. *(continued on page 2)*

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 411 ELM STREET
 3RD FLOOR
 DALLAS, TX 75202-3301
 214.653.7601
www.dallascounty.org

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(10th Street Churches, continued from page 1)

Perhaps contributing to 10th Street's rise as the "Avenue of Churches" was the vision of the founder of Oak Cliff, Thomas Marsalis, who imagined his community as a "New Jerusalem," a spiritual haven, inhabited by "a strictly moral people". Believing the failure of the earlier La Reunion utopian settlement in Dallas to be the result, in part, of the absence of churches, Marsalis devoted himself to establishing congregations throughout Oak Cliff.

Certainly another factor, though, was the rapid growth of the residential area surrounding 10th Street. Jefferson Boulevard, said to be one of the longest and most vibrant commercial streets outside an urban center in the southwest, was only two blocks away and ran parallel to 10th, and down the center of Jefferson ran a street car, providing easy access to the area for everyone in Dallas.



Sunday School at Central Baptist (now Cliff Temple Baptist Church)

By the late 1960s, zoning changes, migration to the suburbs, and other factors led to a steep decline in church attendance on 10th Street. Many churches relocated or even closed, but seven remained and adapted to the changing neighborhoods around them. These seven still offer vital and significant ministry to all in the area: Calvary Baptist, Christ Episcopal, Cliff Temple Baptist, Grace Temple Baptist, Greater El Bethel Baptist, Oak Cliff United Methodist, and Tyler Street United Methodist with Cliff Temple, Oak Cliff, and Tyler Street all having Texas historical markers.

Blackland Prairie in The Heart of Dallas

By Fred Durham



Before tall buildings, paved roads, shopping centers, and housing subdivisions, there were farms. And before the farms, there was the prairie; the land and ancient eco-system, peopled by tribes of Native Americans and roamed by vast herds of buffalo, lay undisturbed for centuries.

The land the first settlers found when they came to what is now Dallas County was part of what we call the Tallgrass Prairie, which once stretched from Canada to South Texas along the eastern edge of the Great Plains, and the part which stretched from the Red River to almost to San Antonio (at one time over twelve million acres) is the Blackland Prairie.

This prairie – actually a mixture of woods, vegetation, and grasslands – played host to drought-resistant native grasses, including big and little bluestem, Indiangrass, and switchgrass. Some of these had root systems sixteen feet deep; all of them supported a wide variety of birds, insects, and mammals. In his book *Prairie Time: A Blackland Portrait*, Matt White notes, "These prairies once exploded with a riot of colorful wildflowers and grasses. From flowers that bloom barely above the ground to others ten feet or more in height, the variety of plant life that existed within just a few feet was remarkable."

Today, by most accounts, less than one-tenth of one percent of the original prairie remains undisturbed by the plow. But there are patches in North Texas, ranging from less than an acre to several hundred acres, where the land remains as it was for the thousands of years before the area was settled. *(continued on page 3)*



Purple Cone Flowers at White Rock Lake

(Blackland Prairie, continued from page 2)

Some of these are in Dallas County. Original prairie survives, for example, in several areas north of White Rock Lake, atop Flag Pole Hill, in Harry S. Moss Park, and in the Springcreek Forest Preserve in Garland.

Each of these is small and may seem unimpressive unless you know what you are looking at: the land as it looked and as it was 150 years ago or, for that matter, 1500 years ago. In Matt White’s words, “To visit one [i.e. a prairie remnant] today is to walk on hallowed ground, a kind of holy grail for those who yearn to revisit the land as it looked before it was remade and reformed by the rushing onslaught of settlement.”

St. Paul United Methodist Church Marker Dedication

By Don Baynham



On Saturday, November 22, members of St. Paul UMC celebrated the unveiling of their new historical marker. The Church, located at 1816 Routh Street on the edge of downtown, is one of the oldest in Dallas, having been organized at or near its present location.

At one time, the Church also served as one of the few schools available for African-American children in Dallas.

In addition to members of the congregation, the ceremony was attended by (pictured from left to right) Pastor Richie Butler, Bishop Michael McKee, Congresswoman Eddie Bernice Johnson, Dallas Historical Commission Chairman Don Baynham, former Pastor Elzie Odum Jr., and, Texas Historical Commission member Mike Donegan.



St. Paul United Methodist Church

William Sidney Pittman Marker Dedication

By Don Baynham



Don Baynham and Jesse Tafalla

On Saturday, April 26, 2014, a marker commemorating the life and work of William Sidney Pittman was dedicated. Mr. Pittman, who was born in 1875 in Montgomery, Alabama and who moved to Dallas in 1907, is remembered as being the first practicing African-American architect in Texas. The designer of dozens of buildings in the U.S., including fourteen in Texas, Pittman died in 1958.

The ceremony, attended by Historical Commission members Don Baynham, Jesse Tafalla, and Charles Stokes, took place at the former St. James AME Church, located on North Good Latimer Expressway (across Florence Street from the Latino Cultural Center) in the Wilson Historic District.

Member Profile: Maria Christina Romero



Maria Cristina Romero was first appointed to the Dallas County Historical Commission in 2013 by County Commissioner Dr. Theresa Daniel and was reappointed in 2015 for another two-year term.

While on the Commission, she has been very interested in preserving and acknowledging elements of Dallas County's history that have previously gone unrecognized. She is especially concerned about commemorating those neighborhoods that have "disappeared" over the years because of new development or changing population patterns.

Maria Cristina is very active in the community, being a champion at volunteer work, cataloging more than 1000 hours of volunteer work a year. She is the President of La Voz Del Anciano ("The Voice of the Elderly"). Maria Cristina is also the board secretary for LULAC District III of North Texas and is on the Board for Dallas County Tejano Democrats. She is an ex-officio Board Officer of both the Dallas Mexican American Historical League and DCET.

Maria Cristina owns two companies, a public relations firm, "Reflexiones De Ti", and "MCR Wausau" which specializes in pavers, bollards, precast, and terrazzo tile.

