

Journey to El Paso, Paisano and Alpine: Pioneer Baptists in westernmost Texas

August 3, 2016

Fourteen people entered the small adobe house on Sunday evening Aug. 26, 1882, doffing their hats and greeting each other with handshakes, nods of welcome and smiles. Maj. W.F. Fewel, a Methodist believer, opened his home for their first meeting with Baptist missionary and church-planter George Baines Jr. They all longed to see a church established in their bustling town on the Mexican border—El Paso, a major railroad stop where people from many cultures had settled.



First Baptist Church in El Paso

Baines preached from Genesis 28:10, and the group sang a favorite hymn, “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” and enjoyed warm fellowship. The group met again the next Sunday, Sept. 3, and officially organized a Baptist church with 20 charter members. The church held its first Sunday school Dec. 10, 1882, with three girls, six boys and 15 adults. The first offering totaled 90 cents.

The congregation erected its original “church house” in 1885 at the corner of San Antonio Street and Magoffin Avenue. Twenty years later, the church moved to a spacious building it constructed two blocks east on Magoffin Avenue. In 1922, First Baptist and Central Baptist churches merged and built a new campus at 805 Montana, where it still conducts vital ministry.



First Baptist Church in El Paso has provided a strong witness for Christ throughout its 134-year history. Today, First Baptist has more than 3,500 members and is known and recognized both for the depth and quality of the ministries and programs it provides to reach El Paso for Christ and for its discipleship of growing Christians. First Baptist has founded many mission churches, and at least a dozen have become self-sustaining. The congregation has thrived under the leadership of its 23 pastors across its 134-year history.



Second Baptist Church in El Paso Its sister congregation, Second Baptist Church, is the oldest black Baptist church in the El Paso Baptist Association and celebrates its 132nd anniversary this year. Missionary E.M. Griggs, helped to organize this church with the five Baptists among the 25 African-Americans living in El Paso in 1884. At first, the tiny band worshipped in a small rented one-room adobe house, but in 1886, the congregation pooled its financial resources, received help from friends at First Baptist and purchased a lot at 515 Utah St., where the church erected a building, made possible by a loan from the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board.

Between 1903 and 1907, Second Baptist built a sanctuary, complete with a bell, at Second and Virginia Streets, not far from downtown, and by 1923, the church membership numbered more than 50 families. Through the years, this church has engaged the larger African-American community of El Paso and earned the respect of the city as it has ministered the gospel, advocated for those without a voice and met the needs of the multi-ethnic community where it has served Christ.

Paisano Baptist Encampment



In 1879, Texas Baptists appointed “cowboy preacher” Leander Randon Millican (1853-1938) to be a missionary to the state’s far-west regions. From San Saba to El Paso, this circuit-riding minister traveled on horseback, forded rising

rivers, faced armed bandits, preached the gospel, started churches and served as pastor of congregations including First Baptist in Midland. He dreamed of a special place where ranchers, cowboys and churches could gather each summer in a “camp meeting” setting for preaching, Bible study and instruction. In 1911, El Paso Baptist Association appointed Millican, cattleman and former Texas Ranger Julius Cancelor Bird and S.C. Holmes, pastor of First Baptist Church in Alpine, to explore the possibility. After much prayer, they founded Paisano Baptist Encampment July 28, 1915.



The faithful gather under trees for a worship service at Paisano Baptist Encampment. In August 1916, George W. Truett, renowned pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas and Baptist statesman, preached the first Paisano sermon under the trees near the present dining shed, standing on the bed of a wagon with a wooden barrel as his pulpit. Millican also preached during the camp meeting.

Families camped in tents or slept under the stars. On Sept. 3-4, 1921, more than 1,000 assembled to hear Truett preach. Area ranchers, including the Kokernots, McCutcheons and Mitchells, brought their chuck wagons, while others cooked over campfires. Millican and other leaders secured the 1,400-acre property, and he was elected president of the encampment's board of directors, a position he served until his death.



From 1916, Truett preached until the year before he died in 1944. B.B. McKinney directed music and composed several works on the Paisano grounds, and

Troy Campbell and Euell Porter followed in his footsteps. Famous Baptist churchmen also spoke in the years that followed. J.B. Tidwell, Kyle Yates, W.R. White, Virtus Gideon and Jack MacGorman, among others, taught the Bible. R.G. Lee, F.B. Thorn, Perry Webb, I.E. Gates, Roy Angell, James Landes and many more preached. Funded by love offerings, Paisano Baptist Encampment still continues its ministry to families and friends who seek a refreshing week of Bible study, worship and fellowship in ways largely unchanged for 100 years.

Alpine

Established in 1883 as a railroad stop beside a gurgling spring, the hamlet of Murphyville—now the city of Alpine—took root and flourished in the valley of the northern Chihuahuan Desert. As people came for commerce and settled in, they brought their faith traditions, too. Baptists led the way when, in the spring of 1885, Baptist missionary George W. Baines held a religious service at the Southern Pacific Railroad Depot on his train stopover from El Paso.

First Baptist Church in Alpine was organized April 14, 1893, with nine founding members—eight women and Julius C. Bird. In the next dozen years, the church met in various buildings until members called their first pastor, D.B. Rose, who led them to build an adobe sanctuary in 1895 on the corner of Fourth Street and Avenue D, still the site of the church today.

FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF ALPINE

WHEN THE RAILROAD CAME THROUGH THIS AREA IN 1882, THE SETTLEMENT OF OSBORNE WAS ESTABLISHED HERE NEAR NATURAL SPRINGS. THE COMMUNITY'S NAME CHANGED TO MURPHYSVILLE IN 1883, AND AT THAT TIME, AS THE POPULATION BEGAN TO GROW, MISSIONARIES ARRIVED FROM NUMEROUS DENOMINATIONS, INCLUDED AMONG THEM WAS THE NOTED REV. GEORGE W. BAINES. IN 1883, HE HELD WHAT WAS REPORTEDLY THE FIRST PROTESTANT MEETING IN THE COMMUNITY, WHICH BECAME KNOWN AS ALPINE IN 1888.

TEN YEARS AFTER BAINES' MEETING, THE FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH OF ALPINE WAS OFFICIALLY ORGANIZED ON APRIL 14, 1893. IT CALLED ITS FIRST PASTOR, THE REV. D.B. ROSE, IN 1894. THAT SAME YEAR, THE CHURCH AFFILIATED WITH THE SWEETWATER ASSOCIATION, AND THE CONGREGATION MET IN VARIOUS LOCATIONS UNTIL PURCHASING THIS SITE AND DEDICATING ITS FIRST SANCTUARY, AN ADOBE STRUCTURE, HERE IN 1896. THE CONGREGATION BY THAT TIME HAD A WOMEN'S MISSIONARY UNION AND HELD REGULAR BIBLE AND SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASSES. MEMBERSHIP INCREASED, AND NEXT TO ITS SANCTUARY IN 1910, THE CONGREGATION ADDED A PARSONAGE.

THE CHURCH GREW, WITH NEARLY TWO HUNDRED MEMBERS ENROLLED IN SUNDAY SCHOOL AND YOUTH AND SERVICE GROUPS. IN 1913, IT BEGAN WORK ON A LARGER SANCTUARY, IN USE BY 1917. ARCHITECT JAMES E. GREENE'S DESIGN INCLUDED AMPLE SANCTUARY SEATING, AS WELL AS SUNDAY SCHOOL ROOMS, A BAPTISTERY, A LADIES AID PARLOR AND A PASTOR'S STUDY.

THE CONGREGATION ADDED FACILITIES AND EXPANDED ITS PROGRAMS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE COMMUNITY, INCLUDING THE SUL ROSS STATE NORMAL COLLEGE, WHICH OPENED IN 1920. WITH NO LOCAL PUBLIC LIBRARY, MEMBERS ESTABLISHED A BORROWING LIBRARY. OTHER PROGRAMS INCLUDED CHILDREN'S AND YOUTH PROGRAMS, BOY SCOUT SPONSORSHIP, MISSION WORK IN ALPINE AND IN MEXICO, AND ACTIVITIES AT SUL ROSS STATE UNIVERSITY. PARTICIPATING IN BAPTIST WORK LOCALLY AND INTERNATIONALLY, FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH CONTINUES TO LEAD ITS LOCAL AND REGIONAL COMMUNITIES THROUGH ITS MANY PROGRAMS, SERVICES AND DEDICATED MEMBERS.



First Baptist Church in AlpineThe church built its present sanctuary in 1916-17 and dedicated it June 13, 1926, with L.R. Millican presiding, just as he had done in 1895. The church has demonstrated its missions heart across the years, founding many missions, daughter churches and ministering to the students at Sul Ross State University, established in 1917. Today, the church continues faithfully to contribute to and participate in the work of an expanding list of

ministries as it celebrates its 121st anniversary.

These stalwart Baptists of the far west are samples of God's continuing grace and work among those whose hearts are determined to follow him.

For more information

- To learn more about Leander Randon Millican's life as a cowboy, preacher and church planter, read his story in *Sermon and Very Short Life Sketch* (1929) and *Brief Summary of My Pastoral and Missionary Work* (1931). He is buried south of the tabernacle at Paisano Baptist Encampment. Also see [*Paisano: Story of a Cowboy and a Camp Meeting*](#) by Katy Stokes (1980, Texian Press).

El Paso

- Visit [First Baptist Church](#) at 805 Montana Avenue, El Paso, TX 79902; Phone (915) 533-1465.
- Visit Second Baptist Church at 401 S Virginia St, El Paso, TX 79901; Phone (915) 532-7860. Learn more about Second Baptist's history [here](#).
- Visit the [Baptist Spanish Publishing House](#) at 7000 Alabama St, El Paso, TX 79904; Phone (915) 566-9656.
- Enjoy the [McDonald Astronomical Observatory](#), established in 1933, located at 3640 Dark Sky Drive, Fort Davis, TX 79734, near the unincorporated community of Fort Davis in Jeff Davis County; Phone (432) 426-3640.
- Visit [Hueco Tanks State Park](#) at 6900 Hueco Tanks Road No. 1, El Paso, TX, 79938; Phone (915) 857-1135.

Paisano Baptist Encampment

- Visit [Paisano Baptist Encampment](#). Contact Bill Collins, president of Paisano Baptist Assembly at P.O. Box 973, Alpine, TX 79831; email

info@paisanoencampment.org; Phone (432) 837-3074.

Alpine

- Visit Historic Alpine sites. For more information, click [here](#).
- Participate in a leisurely [historical walking tour](#).
- Visit [Sul Ross State University](#); Phone (432) 837-8011.

Marfa

- Visit First Baptist Church at 205 N Austin St, Marfa, TX 79843; Phone (432) 729-4155.
- Explore historic [Marfa](#).
- Enjoy [Davis Mountains State Park](#) at TX-118, Fort Davis, TX 79734; Phone (432) 426-3337.
- For information about art in Marfa, click [here](#). Also visit Donald Judd's [website](#). Judd's home and art installations, along with exhibits of other artists, are housed on 340 acres of land on the site of former Fort D.A. Russell at 1 Cavalry Row, Marfa, TX, 79843; Phone (432) 729-4362. Find more details [here](#).