

Survival

The remaining members of Oakwood banded together, gave even more sacrificially, and called the church's first interim pastor, the Reverend C. M. Murphy. It also appointed a committee to provide a newsletter for the membership. The Oracle and Mr. Murphy made their first appearances on Chimborazo Boulevard (formerly Thirty-fourth Street) on April 15, 1931, and both became unifying forces.

Mr. Murphy roamed the streets visiting members of the church and the neighborhood. He formed the habit of dropping into community stores to pass the time of day with shoppers. He also seemed to turn up frequently where children were playing and on one occasion in spite of his age and rotundity chased a group of roller skating youngsters down the street just to say "hello."

[With the division in the membership of 473 and the creation at year's end of an inactive roll, 162 persons withdrew from the church in a nine month period. Nearly one-half of these were placed on the inactive roll.]

Finances continued to plague the reduced congregation and the building note loomed with ominous certainty. Some rules were rescinded, the most controversial being that sales should not be held to raise funds. The entire Sunday School plunged with elation into preparation of a May Fair.

Basically the plan was a greatly expanded two night lawn party on the church grounds. Each Sunday School class assumed responsibility for a booth or activity: Beginners and Primaries sold "grab bags" featuring candy and a surprise for a nickel; single girls of the Euzelian class offered homemade pies and cakes while the young men speculated on who really did the baking; the Country Store held "indescribables" from cellars and attics. 'Tis said that one husband refused vociferously to buy a certain item for his wife and defended himself shouting, "that thing gathered dust in our attic for forty years before I sneaked it out for this!" The T.E.L. class prepared and served a cafeteria supper, but hot dogs, soda pop, candy, and homemade ice cream took care of appetites, too. Game booths, door prizes, and entertainment rounded out the choices for eager children and passersby. The marvelous May Fair of 1931 netted \$413.58 for the building fund. They continued for several years on a Friday and Saturday schedule until the laborious, necessary work overcame the novelty.

Depression days were upon the nation when Richard Carter Ransone accepted the call to become pastor on November 1, 1931. Fellowship and inexpensive recreation united the congregation even more.

At Christmas 1931 a play, The Waif's Christmas, was presented complete with music. Involving all age groups the play was a real tearjerker and requests for repeat performances plus a tour to other churches kept the cast busy until March. The actors and actresses by that time were so welded together that they organized the Star Club, a drama group dedicated to fun and a little dramatics. Social recreation and singing capped the weekly Friday night get-togethers of the club, and on one out-of-town wienie roast thirteen members managed to stash themselves in one four door automobile for the fifty mile ride to Ware's Wharf, Virginia.

Church plays and pageants have been presented throughout the years at Oakwood for Rally Days (Onward to Victory), Children's Days (God's Garden), and at Christmas and Easter. None had such carry-over value, however, as The Waif's Christmas.

About this time the adults formed a Sunday night after the service group called the Seth Parker Club. Seth Parker was the leading character in a popular homespun philosophy, humor, and religious network radio program heard locally at 10:30 p.m. on Sundays. Oakwood folks gathered each week in the Flippens' double living rooms to spin out in a neighborly way some of their own homespun thoughts and to listen to the program. They were so enthralled that they purchased a number of Seth Parker Hymnals in order to participate more fully in singing such out of the ordinary songs as "You Go To Your Church and I'll Go To Mine" and "Jesus Is My Neighbor". The song fests frequently lasted until midnight and at holiday time particularly the group would indulge in game parties that culminated with valiant attempts to sing through the hymn book – all two hundred and thirty selections.

During the following year church member Elmo Redwood labored with zeal to make possible a modern heating plant for the building, the old system seemingly having given out cold air for four years. In the process the Sunday School gained a classroom for young men by refurbishing a portion of the former basement coal bin.

The Depression grew more ominous as banks failed, and members had difficulty remembering their church's financial needs. The treasury dwindled. Pastor Ransone made an unexpected and seldom heard request in the time of crisis. "Reduce my salary," he said, "so that I can do my part in this time of woe." With reluctance the church accepted the proposal on a temporary basis.

Oyster and turkey suppers along with taffy pulls prevented the treasury from being totally exhausted; self-denial containers, similar to mite boxes, were seen in many homes; one child even presented an apron on which she had sewn square patches each containing a nickel contributed by neighbors.

Community-minded Mr. Ransone also served as advisor to the East End Forum, a group of young people organized under the auspices of the YMCA; but he never overlooked his youngest parishioners. On Sunday he called them to congregate in the front pews to his left to hear an object lesson. The youngsters loved the stories which often started with a display of a coin, a leaf, a key, or some other tangible item. The well told sermonettes became a custom from which the whole congregation profited and which held the rapt attention of all children.

The pastor focused attention on teenagers when he organized a boy's basketball team in 1934. Games were played at the Venable Street House of Happiness, the first settlement house in the Southern Baptist Convention. High school and college stars emerged from this activity and at least one of the boys became a successful college basketball coach.

The young men's Sunday School class turned to baseball that spring and joined the Saturday afternoon league for churches using various public recreation facilities. Varina was the arch rival while the home fields were the ball diamonds at old Oakwood playground and new East End Junior High School. The baseball league was the fore-runner of today's extensive church softball program coordinated by the Recreation Departments of Richmond and Henrico County.

Revival services in June were led by Miss Lillian Russell. Overflow congregations came to hear the lady preacher who always wore a long sleeved white dress. A woman preacher was most unique, but her messages were straight down the line in Baptist and Methodist tradition. Some years later she was ordained a Methodist minister and held pastorates in several communities.

As the country recovered from the depths of the Depression, the twenty year old church dared to dream of physical improvements. On Sunday, October 11, 1936, a Hammond electronic organ, a recent addition to the Richmond music scene, was tested in the church auditorium. Members of the Music Committee gathered on a Saturday evening to preview the sound. After a while one member and her husband moved to the balcony and stationed themselves outside a Sunday School classroom which just happened to contain the lady's own old fashioned pump organ. When the demonstrator began to play hymns, the husband quietly directed his wife to play her organ, too. The duet continued for several selections before the demonstrator suddenly stopped in the middle of a song. But the wife, who could neither see nor hear the electronic instrument, continued. The demonstrator showed terror as the music sounded even though he had turned off the electricity. Looking at the committee after a frantic search of his keyboards, he asked, "Does anybody hear music?" The committee sat silent awaiting the outcome. After a moment the prankster husband called out, "Sure, it's coming from up here in Heaven!"

Laughter resounded and the upstairs couple rejoined the committee to work out a proposal for purchase to present to the congregation. Prior to this time a piano served the music needs of the membership. While the church pianists took lessons on the instrument, charter member Eddie R. Buchanan was lent by the retailer to play the organ for all services. The instrument, which was installed on December 13, 1936, cost \$1,335.

But the pastor was responsible for the year's greatest surprise. Without warning he resigned on December 6, 1936. R. Carter Ransone returned to rural pastorates at Mineral and Louisa, Virginia to continue his ministry.