

POSSESS THOU THE WEST AND THE SOUTH: THE FRONTIERS OF REVEREND JOSEPH HOMER PARKER: A SON OF THE EASTERN TOWNSHIPS

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RÉSUMÉ

Le révérend Joseph Homer Parker est le troisième enfant d'une famille de ministres congrégationalistes dont les carrières s'étendent sur toute la période du mouvement missionnaire américain. La saga familiale débuta en 1801, lorsque James Parker prêcha pour la première fois, à Underhill au Vermont ; elle se poursuivit pendant les années du ministère d'Ammi James, « évêque de tous les bois et les forêts », dans les Cantons de l'Est du Québec, et se conclut en 1915 avec la mort de Joseph Homer, « père du congrégationalisme en Oklahoma ». Joseph Homer fit ses études dans diverses écoles de Danville et obtint des diplômes de Middlebury College et du Chicago Theological Seminary. Il entreprit sa carrière religieuse dans plusieurs églises du Michigan, puis passa quelques années à Atlanta, où l'assemblée qu'il avait aidé à établir se retrouva dans une controverse liée à la ségrégation raciale. En 1885, il arriva à Wichita au Kansas et devint le premier « pasteur invité » à Plymouth Church. Il fonda Fairmount College, aujourd'hui Wichita State University. En 1889, Parker devint missionnaire général pour la Société des missions de l'intérieur dans le territoire de l'Oklahoma. Il mit sur pied de nombreuses églises, fonda le Kingfisher College et occupa aussi le poste le mieux rémunéré des territoires, celui de directeur de l'enseignement public et commissaire aux comptes.

ABSTRACT

Reverend Joseph Homer Parker was third in a family of Congregational ministers whose careers spanned the period of the home missionary movement. Their saga began in 1801 when James Parker began preaching in Underhill, Vermont, continued through the years of Ammi James' ministry as "Bishop of All the Woods and Forests" in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, and concluded with the 1915 death of Joseph Homer, the "Father of

Congregationalism in Oklahoma.” Joseph Homer attended Danville schools, graduated from Middlebury College and Chicago Theological Seminary, and launched his career serving churches in Michigan. He spent a few years in Atlanta where the congregation he helped establish became embroiled in a controversy over the “Color-Line.” In 1885, he arrived in Wichita, Kansas, as the first “called” pastor of Plymouth Church. He founded Fairmount College, now Wichita State University. In 1889, Parker became General Missionary for the Home Missionary Society in Oklahoma Territory. He organized churches, started Kingfisher College, and also held the highest paying Territorial position, Superintendent of Public Instruction and Auditor.



*Joseph Homer Parker at
Middlebury College, ca. 1868
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College Archives*

Reverend Joseph Homer Parker was third in a family of Congregational ministers whose joint careers spanned the period of the home missionary movement. This great effort, initiated by New England Protestants, was aimed at preventing “the heathenising of Christians” through establishment of churches and schools on the frontier. The movement began in 1789 with The Missionary Society of Connecticut and grew into the American Home Missionary Society (AHMS), organized in 1826 as a joint venture of Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Following the Civil War, however, denominational cooperation gave way to competition, and by 1893 the name was changed to The Congregational Home Missionary Society.¹

This article focuses on Joseph Homer Parker, his definition of the home mission movement, and his battles with Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians for souls on the frontier. His father and grandfather clearly set the stage for his personal odyssey as he searched for a frontier like theirs, a land with new settlements awaiting churches and schools.

Reverends James, Ammi James, and Joseph Homer Parker continued a long line of active Congregationalists dating from 1633 when William Parker crossed the Atlantic and became one of the original proprietors of Hartford, Connecticut. These three, however, were the first ministers in the family, and their collective parishes spanned a

vast portion of North America, from the Eastern Townships of Quebec to the Oklahoma Territory. The saga began in 1801 when James began preaching in Underhill, Vermont, continued through the years of Ammi James' service as "Bishop of All the Woods and Forests" in the Eastern Townships, and concluded with the 1915 death of Joseph Homer, the "Father of Congregationalism in Oklahoma." Along the way they established schools, newspapers, and an untold number of churches.

James and Ammi James Parker

In 1789, James Parker (1764–1826) moved from Connecticut to Cornwall, Vermont, where he farmed, taught school, and was elected a deacon in the local church because he was "distinguished for his piety and discretion." The following year James married Mary Peck, who had recently moved there with her family from Connecticut. Soon after, he decided to study for the ministry with his pastor, Reverend Benjamin Wooster. In 1801, he traveled back to Connecticut and received one of the first commissions from the new Missionary Society of Connecticut and began preaching at Underhill. He was licensed in 1802 and formally called as the first pastor of the church in 1803. It is still active today as the United Church of Underhill.² At the Church's centennial, Reverend S.L. Bates noted that Parker was a "faithful pastor and an interesting preacher, and though not a man of finished education, he was sound in his religious views and possessed many rare gifts."³

Like many Congregational ministers of the day, James Parker opposed war. On 7 June 1812, with war clouds rolling over the new city of Washington, he reacted to the impending conflict with England by preaching what several members of his congregation felt was a "political sermon," sending "all Federalists (or Washingtonians) to Heaven and all Republicans to hell, and to the lowest hell." His senior deacon was a Republican and in the following conflict Parker resigned, although he requested an Ecclesiastical Council to provide him with a formal dismissal. The Council met and decided that it was best to dissolve the pastoral relationship between Parker and his flock, but concluded "nothing has come before us which in our opinion ought to destroy our confidence in him as Minister of the gospel, and we accordingly recommend him to the Churches as a faithful laborer in the vineyard of our Lord."⁴

James spent the remainder of his life expanding the frontiers of the Congregationalists, traveling over a large portion of Northern Vermont and into Canada, preaching in log houses and barns, orga-

nizing churches, and establishing a pattern his son and grandson were to follow. He is buried in North Troy with the hills of Quebec in the background. Many years later, on 15 November 1898, Reverend Edwin Pond Parker, pastor of Second Congregational Church in Hartford, commemorated the centennial of The Missionary Society of Connecticut at a meeting of the Connecticut Congregational General Assembly in Danbury. He recalled many missionaries who labored as servants of the Society. Of Reverend James Parker he said, "One of his grandsons [Joseph Homer] is now the superintendent to missions in Oklahoma and holds a commission from this Society, and another grandson has the honor of addressing you on this occasion."⁵

Ammi James (1802–1877), the fourth of seven children, was born in Underhill and apprenticed to a store keeper until "the Lord called me to leave merchandise to others, and to enter... the work of the Christian ministry."⁶ He began his studies in the famous "woodhouse school" of Reverend Josiah Hopkins of New Haven, an attic over the woodshed where thirty young men were prepared for the ministry. By 1828, when he was licensed to preach by the Addison County Association at Middlebury, good farm land was scarce and Congregational ministers were surplus. Farmers were going west and also north into the Eastern Townships which offered hardwood forests and gently rolling land, far superior to the rocks and mountains of northern New England. For many, the land was far more important than any feelings of nationality. After seeing "the nakedness of the land, in reference to the stated ordinances and institutions of religion," the new Reverend Parker decided that, "God helping me, I would try Canada." His specific site was suggested by a former liquor salesman who told him about an area seventy miles north of the border where a group of hard-working Vermonters had "no preaching of any sort" and had "no bad habits, except that they use a good deal of whiskey."⁷ Ammi visited these settlers, and they pledged \$300 a year if he would become their pastor. He agreed and obtained the first commission given by the Canadian Education and Home Missionary Society. In 1829, he settled in the Maple Grove that became Danville and spent his life ministering to his home congregation, participating in church affairs in Montreal, and organizing churches throughout the Townships.

Ammi's accounts of traveling through forests and snow to spread the Gospel provide an interesting parallel with his son's experiences with dust storms on the endless expanse of the prairies. Ammi's second church building in Danville, constructed at the end of his

career in 1875, continues to be used today as Trinity United Church where the congregation still remembers him as Father Parker.⁸

A few months after starting his ministry in Danville, Ammi James returned to Vermont and married Eveline Squier whose father had frequently traveled to Montreal on business and who had been living with and assisting her relatives, Reverend and Mrs. Hopkins. Eveline too authored a memoir where she noted that following their wedding they journeyed home to “a portion of God’s heritage of great destitution.”⁹ At first they lived with a widower, and Eveline cared for his family. Later



*The Parker Family in Oklahoma, ca. 1895
The daughters are, clockwise, Gertrude Griswold Parker Morgan on her father's lap, Edna Winifred Parker Prouty, Mary Adella Parker Bort, Harriet Evelyn Parker Camden, Gail Marguerite Parker Eaton on her mother's lap, and Grace Graham Parker in front.*

they built their own home, and the Parkers had a family of six girls and two boys. Three daughters also became engaged in teaching and church activities. Maria, the oldest, taught in area schools for many years, Miranda married Reverend John McKillican who was long associated with the Canada Sunday School Union, and Edna and her husband, Reverend David Watkins, were missionaries in Mexico. Eveline concluded her memoir with the eloquent insight “I have seen the wilderness bud and blossom as the rose.”¹⁰

Ammi Parker has received attention from historians in recent years because of the manuscripts, letters, and sermons he left behind plus his important impact on the character of the Eastern Townships.¹¹ Professor J.I. Little explores Ammi’s community role as a spiritual, moral, and educational leader and notes that his “lack of evangelical self-confidence, combined with his rather pragmatic outlook... no doubt reinforced the tolerant attitude which was an important asset in an ethnically and religiously mixed environment.”¹² His strong temperance convictions probably tested that pragmatism.

The Making of a Home Missionary

Joseph Homer was born in 1848, attended local schools and the academy his father organized in Danville. His father's extensive memoirs reveal little about the Parker family, but it is clear that they decided that Joseph Homer should continue his education, and in 1866 he departed for Vermont and Middlebury College. The catalog for that period notes that candidates for admission to the freshman class would be examined in Latin grammar and writing, Greek grammar, Cicero's Orations, Virgil, Homer's Iliad, geography, arithmetic, and algebra.

The young student lived in Starr Hall, joined the Philomathesian Society, and became a member of Chi Psi, a fraternity that dominated Middlebury social life for many years. The available bits of information about his college days do not suggest that he was contemplating the ministry. Most of the books he checked out of the library, for example, were not on religious subjects. After graduation in 1869, he taught for a year in a Vermont academy and then entered Chicago Theological Seminary. Unlike his father and grandfather, he did not record a reason for entering the ministry. A hint of a possible change is contained in a letter written in 1872 from a Middlebury classmate, then in a Chicago law firm, to Parker's college roommate. "Parker is not as he used to be, being muchly sobered down. His health is not good."¹³ Although Parker led an extremely vigorous life for the next thirty years, he periodically suffered from severe migraine headaches, triggered by periods of intense physical and mental activity.

He graduated from the seminary in 1873, became a U.S. citizen, and assumed his first pastorate. Like his father, he chose to serve expatriate Vermonters. For perhaps the only time in his career, however, his match with his parishioners in Vermontville, Michigan, was not successful. An 1897 history of that community notes that Reverend J. Homer Parker "was liberal in his views, persuasive in his speech, and gifted with considerable eloquence; but his new ways were not quite to the liking of the old heads with their fixed New England notions."¹⁴ It was there, however, that he met his wife and career partner, Carrie Adella Griswold, the daughter of one of the original settlers.¹⁵

In late 1874, Parker became pastor of the Congregational Church in Pontiac, Michigan. Although successful, his heritage apparently began to guide him away from established urban churches, and when offered the pastorate of a new Home Mission church in Bay City, Michigan, he quickly accepted. For three years he worked hard to

expand and serve the congregation, but the headaches returned and forced him to resign in 1879.¹⁶

He recuperated, as he commented later, by obtaining a commission from the AHMS to conduct an exploratory tour of Chippewa County on Michigan's Northern Peninsula during November for the grand sum of eighteen dollars. The Parkers then spent almost two years in Peoria, Illinois, where he was an associate pastor. That too, however, was an established church, and in 1882 he was ready for a new frontier and decided to try the South.

The South

Atlanta, although not a frontier city when the Parkers with their three daughters journeyed there in April of 1882, was in the process of becoming the industrial leader of the post Civil War South. As such, it had many frontier characteristics: rapid migration from other parts of the country, industrial growth, land speculation, and new cultural and religious institutions. In addition, the entire South was essentially new territory for Congregationalists. First Congregational Church was founded in Atlanta in 1867, but its membership was predominately black. Northerners who were becoming part of Atlanta's growing business and professional core were not attending. Parker did not enter the South as a minister, however, but as secretary of the fledgling Atlanta YMCA, a role change that had little impact on his organizational style. YMCA activities were included in the church notes section of the *Atlanta Constitution*, gospel meetings were held on Sunday afternoons, a choral union was organized, and special meetings were scheduled for lawyers, merchants, mechanics, and boys under fifteen.

Within weeks of his arrival, Parker was also talking with Atlanta residents about forming a second Congregational Church, one that would appeal to Northern immigrants. To the later surprise of many Congregationalists, one of the major proponents was Reverend Joseph E. Roy, Atlanta field superintendent for the American Missionary Association (AMA). The AMA was a Congregational society whose domestic role was organizing schools and churches serving blacks and Native Americans. The group quickly enlisted the support of Reverend James H. Harwood of St. Louis, the AHMS superintendent for the area. Harwood traveled to Atlanta for a meeting on 6 September 1882, where a motion by "Bro. Parker" to begin regular weekly meetings in the YMCA was adopted.¹⁷ Thus, Piedmont Congregational Church was organized with fourteen members.

A month later, Piedmont elected Reverend Parker as pastor at a



A Group of Superintendents, ca 1906.

Parker is seated second from right. Source: The Home Missionary, March, 1907, 360.

salary of \$1,200 a year. He resigned from the YMCA and went to work exhibiting a pattern which became his hallmark for home mission activity. In addition to Sunday morning and evening preaching services, Sunday school, and Wednesday prayer meetings, he organized weekly groups for women, men, and young people and started a newspaper, *The Southern Congregationalist*. The paper's masthead carried the motto which reflected Parker's personal mission for his church and himself: "Possess Thou The West And The South." In addition, he immediately established mission churches at area cotton mills which included both day and night schools for mill workers and their children.

While his father had exhibited a conservative attitude toward distinguishing between church and society, Joseph Homer ranged far beyond church doctrine in his activities and sermons which were often addressed to those not familiar with the "Congregational Way."¹⁸ "Citizens and strangers" were invited to hear sermons titled "Gifts of God," "Significant Saloon Signs," and "Mind Thine Own Business." Like his father, he was active in the Temperance movement and was appointed a state organizer by the Grand Lodge of the Knights of Temperance.

Parker's schedule was punishing, and the headaches returned in

the summer of 1884, compelling him to resign. He held an AHMS commission at one of the cotton mill missions for several months, however, with a growing family that included four daughters, he needed full-time employment. Early in 1885, he accepted a pastorate in Storm Lake, Iowa.

Although Piedmont was launched with the blessings of the leadership of both missionary societies, it immediately sailed into a storm. As the excellent centennial history of the congregation reports, creation “of a Congregational church for whites touched off a debate within denominational circles that would last almost to the end of the century.”¹⁹ The Congregational press, led by its national journals the *Advance*, the *Independent*, and the *Congregationalist*, entered into a heated discussion over the “Color-Line,” the popular name for segregated churches. The debate was focused not only on the issue of separate churches – although Piedmont was never mentioned by name – but also on the geographical assignments of the two missionary societies.²⁰ Parker was probably hurt most by the Vermont *Chronicle* which devoted the front page of its 21 September 1883, issue to a letter and an editorial telling the AHMS to stay out of AMA territory. The argument continued through the October issues, including a letter by Harwood defending the AHMS. In the first issue of the *Southern Congregationalist*, Parker responded:

We invite the editor of the Vermont Chronicle and all C. L. Congregationalists down to visit us. If there is no better work in the Green Mountain State than setting up a man of straw to fire at we will furnish you, brethren, the “man of sin” down here to aim your weapons at, if you load them with gospel ammunition. Get facts, brethren, before you *blackball* all “us white folks.”²¹

Parker was riled, and his response did not reflect his normal, educated and deliberate, writing style. Dealing with the controversy, however, fell to Parker’s successors, and he apparently guided the congregation in selecting them. Immediately following was Reverend Zachary Eddy from Detroit who had preached at the dedication of Parker’s new building back in Bay City. Eddy considered Piedmont the pastorate of his “old age.” George Turk, a Canadian Methodist served as interim pastor for a year and was followed in 1888 by Reverend Alvin Foote Sherrill, another “son of the Eastern Townships.” In 1837, Ammi Parker had attracted E.J. Sherrill from the States as pastor of the church at Eaton Corner, and Alvin Foote was born there in 1842. He graduated from McGill and Andover Theological Seminary and was pastor in Omaha, Nebraska, for seventeen years

before moving to Atlanta. He was later professor and dean at Atlanta Theological Seminary.

The evidence is inconclusive concerning whether Parker was a participant in a strategy developed by the two missionary societies to organize a second church in Atlanta or whether he was merely there at a time when a local group decided to form a church with the blessing of both the AMA and the AHMS. In 1954, Professor Richard Drake of Berea College reviewed the debate and concluded that "Congregationalism, like the country as a whole, began accommodating itself to the Southern attitude on race, and 'Jim Crow' had found a home even in the 'pure church' of the Pilgrims..."²²

The West

Wichita, Kansas, was evolving from its "cow town" days into a rail and manufacturing center by 1885. Growth was rapid, and land speculation was a popular game. During the first five months of 1887, for example, the young town trailed only New York and Kansas City in real estate transfers.²³ Religious denominations were "competing for souls" in Wichita much as they had in the Eastern Townships a century earlier. Congregationalists were among the last to organize, but a group of New Englanders began to meet and, with the aid of the AHMS, they established Plymouth Congregational Church. During the summer of 1885, they invited Reverend Parker to preach and a few weeks later selected him as their first "called minister." The Parker family left Iowa after only a few months and headed west to Wichita, their seventh home in twelve years.

With the exception of the comment from Vermontville there is little evidence that Parker was spellbinding in the pulpit. His skills were organizational and entrepreneurial. His wife Carrie wonderfully complemented these skills. While her primary responsibilities were running a home with young children, supervising their frequent moves, and cooking for the constant flow of people Joseph Homer brought home for dinner, the record is clear that she was a pastor's wife exemplar. Plymouth immediately held Sunday morning and evening services plus Sunday School, Bible study on Monday, prayer meetings on Thursday, and groups for women, men, and young people throughout the week. Carrie was the key to organization and production of church activities, particularly music, women's groups, and church suppers. The monthly theme suppers were fundraisers with the Parker daughters providing music. An orchestra was organized, and Parker started a newspaper, the *Western Evangelist*. In November, Joseph Homer's sister and her husband, Edna and David

Watkins who were missionaries in Mexico, spoke at a number of Wichita churches.

Early in 1886, a small church building was ready for occupancy. Parker's Sunday morning sermons were traditional, but for the evening service he turned his attention to the city with such topics as "Is There a Devil?" "God in Wichita and How He is Treated," "The Ethics of Baseball," "The Best Bank in Wichita to Deposit In and Check From," and "Should Women Vote?" The suffrage movement in Wichita met at the Parker home and at Plymouth Church.

By the summer of 1887, Plymouth membership had grown to 113, and Reverend Parker began his third year in Wichita with a sermon titled "Congregationalism in America." In it he provided an explanation for the zeal with which he carried out his role in the home missionary movement and in, as well, the larger American concept of "manifest destiny." He noted that "this American Republic belongs to Congregationalists. We have a preemptive right to this vast domain."²⁴

When the Parkers arrived in Wichita, most religious groups were in the process of starting or planning a college, and Joseph Homer was not to be left behind. Early in 1886, he began talking with Wichita businessmen about forming a school. Many denominational colleges were one part religion, one part community building and one part land speculation. The Parker group formally organized in December of 1886 and announced plans for Wichita Ladies' College. Why a college for women? Available documents hint at no answer to the question. Perhaps it was because all of the other proposed schools in Wichita were for men, or perhaps because the Congregationalists already had a college in Kansas (Washburn in Topeka) which was for men, or perhaps it was because the fifth Parker daughter arrived in 1886.

Responding to the practices of "boom town" Wichita, the new college Board of Trustees, with Parker as president, advertised for bids for location of the college. The best offer of land and money came from a group promoting a development several miles from the city on Fairmount Hill, overlooking the Arkansas River Valley. In recognition, the name was changed to Fairmount Ladies' College. Work began on a building which broke with the tradition of New England liberal arts colleges where the main building usually faced inward to a campus quadrangle, or oval, surrounded by other buildings. Instead, Parker directed his building to the west, facing away from the proposed campus but toward the frontier. He also organized Fourth Congregational Church to be the college church even though

the AHMS opposed a fourth congregation in Wichita. This church exists today as Fairmount Church.

In the summer of 1887, he spent several weeks visiting Smith and Wellesley to prepare for the new college. By 1888, however, the headaches returned and he was often absent from the pulpit. In late August, he resigned because of "ill health" and began working full-time for the college with the title of Fiscal Agent at a salary of one hundred dollars a month plus travel expenses. Parker filled the Plymouth pulpit on occasion for several months and was greatly missed by the congregation. One Wichita newspaper editorialized, "There are some men whose places cannot be filled by others and their removal creates a condition something like the play of Hamlet with Hamlet left out of the cast."²⁵

The record is not clear concerning whether or not Parker intended, at any point, to become the college president. The question becomes moot, however, because the economic depression that began in 1887 hit Wichita exceptionally hard. Construction stopped on the building and, in late 1888, plans to open the college in January 1889 were cancelled. The recession forced many college supporters to leave and the building stood unfinished on Fairmount Hill. The Board finally opened an academy in 1892 which was expanded to a coeducational, four-year institution when Fairmount College began classes in 1895. Of the many colleges started and planned in Wichita in the 1880s, only Fairmount survived. One important reason was Parker's selection of key businessmen in the community to serve on the Board. He was not concerned with their specific church affiliation and, in fact, the Board had a Jewish member in 1887, a rare happening in the nation for that era. In 1926, Fairmount became the Municipal University of Wichita and in 1964 it entered the Kansas system as Wichita State University. Of the more than forty American colleges and universities founded by the Congregationalists, Wichita State University is the largest.²⁶

When plans for the college collapsed in 1888, Parker needed a job. He became pastor of Bethany Church in Chicago, however, his family remained in Wichita. Parker was in Chicago on Easter Sunday in 1889 when Oklahoma Territory opened for settlement the next day with the first of its famous "land runs."²⁷

Our Possibilities Will Be Grand

Although the AHMS, now solely supported by Congregationalists, was not officially represented on that exciting day in 1889, Reverend Richard Baxter Foster did accompany the land seekers, and in the

afternoon he preached from a wagon in the instant city of Stillwater. Foster, whom Parker had wanted as minister of his Fairmount College church, was pastor in Cheney, a town near Wichita. He had commanded black troops in the Civil War and then founded what is now Lincoln University in Missouri. When Foster returned to Kansas a few days later, he wrote the AHMS and recommended that the Congregationalists should "enter the field" with Parker as General Missionary. The Society agreed, and soon Parker was in the Territorial capital of Guthrie organizing his first church in the shanty of a couple he had married years before in Bay City. The new Territory contained about 3100 square miles, less than half the size of the Eastern Townships, but Joseph Homer Parker had found his frontier and the role he wanted to play in it.

The job of the general missionary was to organize churches and recruit ministers, skills that were Parker's strength. He enticed a number of Kansas colleagues to join him, including Reverend Jeremiah Evarts Platt to be in charge of Sunday schools. Reverend Foster was asked to form a permanent church in Stillwater, and it was in Foster's church that today's Oklahoma State University held its first classes.

Abraham Jefferson Seay was a justice of the Territorial Supreme Court and a proponent of Kingfisher as the permanent Territorial capital. Seay and Parker became friends, and Parker elected to locate his "mother" church in Kingfisher. Kingfisher ultimately lost the contest to Oklahoma City, a serious setback for both the town and for Congregationalism which, in its fierce competition with other denominations for members, ultimately found itself geographically disadvantaged. Men with Parker's ability were in short supply and he was selected as county superintendent of schools. He maintained his home in Kingfisher, although he spent much of his time either traveling or in Guthrie twenty miles to the east. His diary for December 1891 records that he visited 17 congregations in 21 days, covering 300 miles by rail and buggy.²⁸ In 1892, Seay became Governor and appointed Parker to the highest paying Territorial position, Superintendent of Public Instruction and Auditor. With two territory-wide jobs he was busier than ever, however, as he was fond of saying, "we are in Oklahoma, not for sightseeing, but for soul-saving."²⁹

By 1893, the Territory, greatly expanded in area, wanted its own missionary district, separate from St. Louis. Opinion was divided, however, on whether or not Joseph Homer should be appointed superintendent as long as he held public office. The national headquarters in New York also expressed concern. Parker fought back, as

had his father 60 years earlier when confronted with what he thought were bureaucratic colonial rules.³⁰ He marshaled letters of support, and on 23 March 1893, wrote Reverend William Kincaid, Secretary of the AHMS, a ten-page letter stating that he would accept a salary of \$1,300 (less than other Superintendents) and would need no traveling or office expenses. He pointed out that he could handle both jobs when traveling and save the Society funds that could be devoted to additional missionaries. His heart was with the Society, however, and he wrote "there is no work in the world I love as I do this," agreeing to resign the Territorial position if required.³¹ His arguments won: Reverend Parker was appointed Superintendent of both Oklahoma and Indian Territories and allowed to keep his public office.³²

Parker organized the Gospel Wagon in 1891 to reach the numerous scattered settlements. Staffed with a young minister and two recent college graduates, equipped with an organ given by Bethany Church in Chicago, utilizing song books donated by Plymouth Church in Wichita, and pulled by a good team of horses, the Gospel Wagon set off on a two year tour of Oklahoma. The climate was always a challenge with swollen summer streams and frozen winter rivers the norm. Miss Dean Moffatt, a visiting missionary from Boston, wrote of traveling through the Territory with Reverend Parker in 1894 and of stopping at a sod house near the first church they were to visit to remove some of the accumulated dust. "I got the outside of it off, but it took me a long time to get the sand out of my ears; and as I met the twinkling eye of Mr. Parker, I knew he was enjoying one of my first impressions of Oklahoma."³³

Reverend W. G. Puddefoot, Field Secretary of the AHMS, wrote of his 1895 travels with Parker to dedicate three churches west of Enid. Waiting at one church and looking over the prairie Puddefoot saw dark spots that grew larger, turning into people, and commented, "They appear as if rising from the ground.' 'Well, [said Parker, referring to the dugout homes] most of them are."³⁴

The 16 September 1893, opening of the Cherokee Outlet, popularly but erroneously termed the Cherokee Strip, was probably the most storied of the Oklahoma land runs. In one sense it represented the pinnacle of the frontier as on that day one hundred thousand settlers, including more than a few malcontents and ruffians, sought their vision of the American dream. The Strip was a rich prairie, more than fifty miles wide and extending along the Kansas border for three times that distance. Today it has a population of more than 110 000, including the city of Enid.

Parker envisioned this future, but as usual he was short of funds and the Congregational requirement that ministers devote full-time to serving a single church seemed to place him at a disadvantage when competing with the Methodists and their circuit riders and the Baptists whose pastors often had their own farms. For months he had been pleading for funds from Society headquarters and informing them in almost military terms that he had good men ready to go in and “occupy” a few of the “pivotal points.” Secretary Kincaid responded with \$1,500. On April 5, Parker wrote back to thank him but also commented:

It is far too small, but I believe the Com. did the best it could under the circumstances. Is this our absolute limit? Can we stretch this somewhat? Some of the largest towns in the Territory will be in there, and we ought to have a strong connecting link with Kansas.... Our possibilities there will be grand.³⁵

On the eventful day, Parker was on the starting line north of Hennessey and close to the Rock Island Railroad, a point where 10 000 entered the Strip. There were horseman, buggies, heavy wagons loaded with merchandise, and a train with three engines and forty stock cars “filled and covered, sides and top, with living humanity.” Eleven minutes before noon a false signal was given, and “the prairie was covered with the myriad racers.” He followed in his buggy for several miles and told his readers:

I wanted to shout with the shouting thousands on the train one moment, and then I found my throat filling and my eyes weeping the next. I went home a much more thoughtful man than I went to that scene, and suffered with ache of head and heart for forty-eight hours upon my bed as I have seldom suffered.³⁶

Reverend Parker continued his article with a plea for funds and a comment on the nature of the Oklahoma land runs which he said aided “the gambler, the adventurer, and the dishonest speculator.”

Hundreds of souls can be saved, if God’s people will give us but a few hundred dollars to tide over until titles are settled and owners compromise, or the better one kills the other; when with the aid of the Congregational Building Society, we will build permanently for our work.³⁷

The Strip spawned a number of growing communities and by 1894 Oklahoma Territory, by then about half the size of today’s state, had 63 churches with 1563 members.³⁸ Guthrie had a separate congregation for blacks. Both Parker and Governor Seay pushed for “equal

school privileges” for black children, and children of both races attended the public school in Kingfisher at that time.

For Parker, a church newspaper and college were necessary components of settlement, thus, the *Oklahoma Outlook* was launched. Kingfisher College, where Parker Hall faced the West, opened in 1895, the same year as Fairmount, and the two soon became football rivals. He also started academies in Cushing and Carrier to serve rural areas without high schools and to function as feeders for the College. Kingfisher College pioneered the development of work programs to support students with broom and concrete stone factories and a college farm. The College produced several Rhodes scholars but was isolated from what became the population centers, and it could not compete with state institutions. It closed during World War I and did not reopen afterward. It lives on, however, in the Kingfisher College Chair of the Philosophy of Religion and Ethics at the University of Oklahoma.

Homespun fun was a part of Oklahoma life a century ago. Gail, the youngest of the Parker daughters, wrote a fascinating account of growing up in Kingfisher and attending the college there. Her memoir begins when her father, who was at his office in Guthrie, received a telegram stating “Come home and see Number 6.” She reports her father as observing, “What chance does one lone man have in a house with a wife and six daughters? It is surely “The House of the Seven Gabblers.” According to Gail:

Our home was free food and lodging for all ministers and their families.... The “gabblers,” young and older, gave up their beds, slept, though it might be grumbling secretly to each other, on the floor, and ate at the second or third table.... How excited we always were when the missionary barrels arrived from the East, and how very often we were disappointed when the contents, often moth-eaten and buttonless, were unpacked.... When I was still very young my parents bought acreage just outside Kingfisher, and Mother, though she had sworn as a girl that she would marry neither a minister nor a farmer, now was the wife of both.... Those were busy happy days. Hayrides, taffy pulls, tacky parties may sound like tame entertainment to the young people of today, but no one had more fun on less money than we did in those days.³⁹

Another daughter, Harriet Parker Camden, wrote the words and music for “Oklahoma, A Toast,” the official Territorial and State song until it was replaced in 1953 by Rogers and Hammerstein’s popular hit, “Oklahoma.”

Parker retired in 1906, a year before Oklahoma became a state. He was only fifty-eight, but contemporary photographs reveal the impact of his active frontier life. He had carried Oklahoma Congregationalism to its pinnacle. In 1911, there were 63 churches with 3745 members. By 1947, shortly before their merger into the United Church of Christ (UCC), the Congregationalists had declined to 26 churches with 2208 members, concentrated in the larger cities. The New England business community and the Congregational Home Missionary Society had lost interest in aiding struggling churches on the essentially settled frontier and shifted their attention to growing immigrant populations on the east and west coasts. In similar fashion, Fairmount College faced closing as Eastern support for buildings and operating expenses withered, but it found a new beginning as the first municipal university west of the Mississippi.

Membership in the Kingfisher Church also was declining, and Joseph Homer came out of retirement to again serve as its pastor. He officiated at the marriage of his youngest daughter on Christmas day in 1914, and in the summer of 1915 the Father of Congregationalism in Oklahoma died after several months of illness. Joseph Homer and Carrie Adella Griswold Parker are buried in Kingfisher Memorial Cemetery.

A Century Later

Ultimately, the frontiers of the New World did not embrace the *Congregational Way* to the extent envisioned by the Reverends James, Ammi James, and Joseph Homer Parker. Church buildings and members, however, were not the only product of the home mission effort, particularly during the last half of the nineteenth century. Joseph Homer's congregation-building activities – the clubs, dinners, newspapers, music groups, schools, social activism like advocating women's suffrage – placed him at the hub of that which brought cultural and social enrichment to the people who ventured into unsettled forests and prairies. And it was all fostered with an undiminished dream of a better tomorrow.

More directly, the Parker's legacy continues today as students fill classrooms at Wichita State University and as congregations occupy pews in churches across the continent. Among them are United Church in Underhill, Trinity United Church in Danville, Plymouth-Trinity United Church in Sherbrooke, First Congregational UCC in Bay City, Central Congregational UCC (Piedmont) in Atlanta, Plymouth Congregational and Fairmount Congregational UCC in Wichita, Mayflower (Pilgrim) Congregational UCC in Oklahoma

City, and Federated Church in Kingfisher. Like so many unsung heroes, Joseph Homer Parker created futures in many locales.

NOTES

1. For a general account of the American Home Missionary Society (AHMS) in the United States, see Joseph B. Clark, *Leavening the Nation: The Story of American Home Missions* (New York: The Baker & Taylor Co., 1903); and Colin B. Goodykoontz, *Home Missions on the American Frontier, with Particular Reference to the American Home Missionary Society* (Caldwell, Idaho: The Caxton Printers, 1939). Another excellent source is *The Home Missionary*, the monthly magazine of the Society which was first published in 1828 and merged with *The American Missionary* in 1909.
2. The AHMS established religion on the frontier by initially giving commissions to ministers who would help communities organize and then by providing financial assistance to pay pastors until a church became self-sufficient. Usually each state or territory had a resident superintendent, although sometimes they were grouped.
3. S.L. Bates, *The Continuity of Labor, An Historical Sketch of the First Congregational Church, Underhill, Vermont* (Burlington: M.D.L. Thompson, 1901), 9.
4. United Church of Underhill, Vermont, *Record Book* (typescript), pp.119–121.
5. Edwin Pond Parker, *Historical Discourse in Commemoration of the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Missionary Society of Connecticut, 1798–1898* (Hartford: Press of the Case, Lockwood & Brainard Company, 1898), 24. Other sources for James Parker's ministry include John M. Comstock, *The Congregational Churches of Vermont and their Ministry, 1762–1942, Historical and Statistical* (St. Johnsbury: the Cowles Press, 1942); and Azel Washburn Wild, "Early History of Congregationalism in Vermont," manuscript, Congregational Library, Congregational House, Boston.
6. Ammi James Parker, manuscript, United Church of Canada Archives, Eastern Townships Research Centre (ETRC), Bishop's University (5/PAR/4), 33. The Parker collection contains three manuscripts, sermons, letters, and other related items.
7. Ammi James Parker, 38, 40.
8. In 1949 Reverend Albert Hinton, who served as minister of Trinity United Church in Danville during the Second World War, commemorated Ammi's life with an historic poem, "Father Parker of Danville." United Church Archives, ETRC, 5/PAR/6, d.

9. Eveline Parker, "Squier Family Record," 14 March 1884, manuscript in Parker collection of the author, photocopy, 2.
10. Eveline Parker, 2.
11. Portions of Ammi Parker's manuscripts have been published. See Douglas Walkington, "To Prevent the Heathenising of Christians: The Memoirs of Rev. Ammi James Parker," *Bulletin of the Congregational Library*, 31, 2 (1980); Nathan H. Mair, ed., *Ammi Parker's Memorial of the Pioneers of the Eastern Townships of Quebec: Write this for a Memorial in a Book* (Montreal: The Archives Committee of the Montreal and Ottawa Conference of the United Church of Canada, 1985); and J. I. Little, "Perils in the Wilderness: Pioneer Tales from the Reverend Ammi Parker's 'Memories of Life in Canada,'" *Journal of Eastern Townships Studies*, 5, fall 1994: 99–125.
12. J. I. Little, "Serving 'The North East Corner of Creation': The Community Role of a Rural Clergyman in the Eastern Townships of Quebec, 1829–1870," *Histoire sociale / Social History*, 30, 59 (1997): 52. See also Françoise Noël, *Competing for Souls: Missionary Activity and Settlement in the Eastern Townships, 1784–1651* (Sherbrooke: Université de Sherbrooke, 1988): 179–195.
13. Letter to Frederick Draper Mussey, 22 June 1872, Frederick D. Mussey file, Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, Vermont. The author of the letter is unknown. Mussey, a journalist, was president of the Washington D.C. Gridiron Club in 1890.
14. Edward W. Barber, *The Vermontville Colony: Its Genesis and History, with Personal Sketches of the Colonists* (Lansing: Robert Smith Printing Company, n.d.), 58.
15. George M. Platt, "Carrie Adella Griswold, Fairmount's Founding Lady," in *Presidential Partners: First Ladies of the University*, ed. James J. Rhatigan (Wichita: The Wichita State University Foundation, 2002): 1–5.
16. *A Souvenir Booklet* (Bay City, MI: First Congregational Church-BUCC, 1990).
17. Central Congregational Church of Atlanta, Georgia, *Book I* [of the church records], 5. Piedmont changed its name twice in a short period, first to Church of the Redeemer and then to Central Congregational Church. In the 1960s it relocated from downtown Atlanta to a suburban site.
18. Professor Little discusses Ammi Parker's "reservations about quick conversions" in *Community Role of a Rural Clergyman*: 29–36.
19. Robert C. McMath, ed., *A Southern Pilgrimage: Central Congregational Church of Atlanta, Georgia, 1882–1982* (Atlanta: Central

- Congregational Church, 1982), 21. Although Joseph Homer Parker probably had little contact with blacks before Atlanta, his father, according to Eastern Township legend, played a significant role in bringing Reverend Alexander Twilight to teach in the Eastern Townships in 1847. Twilight, who graduated from Middlebury in 1823, was the first black citizen to earn a degree from an American college. Bernard Epps has written an interesting article about him: "Pioneer Teachers in the Townships: Twilight's Academy in Richmond," *Sherbrooke Record*, September 9, 1988, 5.
20. In September 1883, the AMA devoted a major portion of its magazine, *The American Missionary* (33, 9: 267-278) to opinions printed in various Congregational publications concerning "The Color-Line."
 21. *Southern Congregationalist*, November 1883, 3.
 22. Richard B. Drake, "The Growth of Segregation in Congregationalism in the South," *The Negro History Bulletin*, 21 (March 1958): 137.
 23. L. Curtise Wood, *Dynamics of Faith: Wichita 1870-1897* (Wichita: Wichita State University, 1969), 106.
 24. *Western Evangelist*, September 22, 1887, 1.
 25. *Wichita Eagle*, January 14, 1889, 4.
 26. For a history of Wichita State University, see Craig Miner, *Uncloistered Halls: The Centennial History of Wichita State University* (Wichita: Wichita State University Endowment Association, 1955) and George M. Platt, ed., *Standing Proudly On the Hill: A Pictorial History of Wichita State University 1895-1995* (Wichita: Wichita State University Centennial Committee, 1995).
 27. Prior to 1889 the land now comprising the state of Oklahoma, with the exception of the Panhandle, was open for settlement only to Native Americans. Then in a series of openings culminating in 1896, homesteads and town lots were made available to the public. A variety of methods were used, including allotments, sealed bids, a lottery, and the most famous, at least in folklore, the *land runs* where prospective claimants were required to wait at starting lines until a specific time and then race to physically occupy parcels which they could then claim. Runs were used in the initial opening of the Unassigned Lands in 1889 and the Cherokee Outlet in 1893. For further information about the runs, see H. Wayne Morgan and Anne Hodges Morgan, *Oklahoma: A Bicentennial History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1977): 42-71.
 28. J.H. Parker, "Oklahoma," *The Home Missionary*, 54 (March 1892): 523-524.
 29. J.H. Parker, "Oklahoma," *The Home Missionary*, 64 (July 1901): 22.

30. See Little, "Community Role of a Rural Clergyman," 36.
31. J.H. Parker to William Kincaid, 23 March 1893, Parker collection of the author, photocopy. The Amistad Research Center at Tulane University has a collection of the AHMS papers which includes a few Parker letters. The Amistad Center also has the archives of the Congregational Church Building Society which include many Parker letters about construction of churches. The Congregational Library in Boston has yearbooks and minutes of the Congregational Association of Oklahoma from 1890–1918, except for 1896 and 1912.
32. In one sense, the issue became moot when Cleveland was again elected President and appointed a new Territorial Governor. Parker refused to resign, claiming he was appointed for a specific term, leading to a landmark court case in the United States concerning tenure of appointed officials (*Cameron v. Parker*, 2 Okl. 277; 38, 14, 1894).
33. M. Dean Moffatt, "First Impressions of Oklahoma," *The Home Missionary*, 57 (August 1895): 226.
34. W.G. Puddefoot, *The Minute Man on the Frontier* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1895): 309. Puddefoot does not identify Parker by name.
35. J.H. Parker to William Kincaid, 5 April 1893, Parker collection of the author, photocopy.
36. J.H. Parker, "Opening of the Cherokee Strip," *The Home Missionary*, 56 (January 1894): 451.
37. J.H. Parker, "Opening of the Cherokee Strip," 455.
38. Data about church numbers and membership are from the yearbooks published by the Congregational and Congregational Christian Churches through 1947.
39. Gail Parker Eaton, "The House of the Seven Gabblers," n.d., manuscript in the Parker collection of the author, photocopy, 1, 2, 6.

