

# On the Rails with the Gospel

## *The Beginnings*

When Jesus said, "Go Ye into all the World," he started his followers upon a travel adventure. The disciples walked; Paul traveled by ship. The circuit rider rode on horseback. It remained for the railroad age to produce the Chapel Car, a complete church on steel rails, to take the Gospel into the part of the world which the railroad opened up.

Dr. Wayland Hoyt, then pastor of the First Baptist Church in Minneapolis, suggested building the first Chapel Car. While riding through northern Minnesota in 1890 in a private railroad car, he turned to his brother Colgate and said "have you noticed the large number of towns through which we have been passing today without a sign of a church building in them? Why couldn't a car be built so that it would contain a combination church and parsonage? The car could be sidetracked in these small towns and the people be invited in to hear the Gospel."

Dr. Hoyt also shared his idea with Mr. Boston W. Smith, a layman, serving as the Sunday school missionary for the American Baptist Publication Society in Minnesota that arranged for the railroad to park a coach on a siding on Saturday evening for use by the town as location for a Sunday school on the following morning. The idea intrigued Smith. For him Dr. Hoyt's proposal was an expansion of that original effort and bore endless possibilities. Smith went on to serve as the Superintendent of Chapel Car Ministries from 1891 to 1907.

## *Car #1 Evangel*

Colgate Hoyt was challenged by the idea and in response organized a "Chapel Car Syndicate" composed of John D. Rockefeller, Charles L. Colby, John R. Trevor, James B. Colgate, E. J. Barney and himself. These men agreed to underwrite the car, which E. J. Barney agreed to have his company, the Barney and Smith Car Company of Dayton, Ohio, build at cost for \$4,000. Dr. Hoyt turned to Boston Smith for the car's design. In a matter of a few hours Smith had consulted with an architect and presented Dr. Hoyt with the plans. The car was built by the Barney and Smith Car Company of Dayton, Ohio. The car was completed in the spring of 1891 and dedicated at the Annual Meeting of the Publication Society in May. By fall it had made its initial journey, promotional in nature, going as far west as Livingston, Montana.

The initial purpose of the Chapel Car was to carry the Gospel, through the distribution of Bibles and literature and the establishment of Sunday schools, to the frontier of the American West. A second purpose was to provide a ministry to the workers of the railroads traveled by the car. In later years the visiting of communities for the strengthening of weak or dying churches became a third purpose.

In winter of 1891-92 the Evangel began its first tour of evangelization, serving in Oregon and Washington, with Rev. and Mrs. E. G. Wheeler as the missionaries. The car was in service for 34 years in Minnesota, South Dakota, Montana, California, Arkansas, Louisiana, Indian Territory (Oklahoma), Kansas, Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming. It was retired in Rawlins, Wyoming in 1925 and served as the meeting place for the First Baptist Church. When the church constructed a building, the car was incorporated into the structure. Parts of the car are visible in the building to this day.

## *Future Cars*

The success of the first car, reported at the Annual Meeting of the Publication Society in 1892, resulted in the raising of funds for Car #2, Emmanuel, which was built at a cost of \$7,500 and dedicated at the Annual Meeting in 1893. The next two years saw the construction and dedication of Car #3, Glad

Tidings and #4, Goodwill. Car #5, Messenger of Peace, was dedicated in 1898 followed by Herald of Hope, Car #6 in 1900. All of the cars were constructed with voluntary contributions.

Operational cost of the cars was another matter. Money for these expenses were raised on a donation basis rather than coming from the budgeted funds of the Publication Society. Boston Smith spent a great deal of his time and energy in securing financial support for the operation of the cars. Children's Day offerings, collections from Smith's many speaking engagements, and donations ranging from a few pennies to dollars covered the expenses.

One of the expenses occurred in the operation of a Chapel Car was the cost of moving a car from one town to another. This expense was called a trackage fee. When the question of this charge was first raised by Boston Smith in conversation with the Northern Pacific Railroad in 1891, the railroad responded with the following:

Division Superintendents and Conductors of the Northern Pacific Railroad Company:

*You will pass Mr. Boston W. Smith and one attendant, with Chapel Car "Evangel" over our lines. You will arrange to take the car on any train he desires; you will sidetrack it wherever he wishes. Make it as pleasant for Mr. Smith as you can.*

*Wm. S. Mellen  
General Manager*

Fortunately for the Publication Society this practice was followed by most of the railroads. Where such courtesy was not offered the Society covered the expense. The policy of free transportation, however, ended in 1914. From that year on the Publication Society in most cases paid for the transport of the cars. This additional expense and the declining need for the cars in terms of their original purposes led to the gradual termination of the Chapel Car Ministries. The final car in service, Messenger of Peace, was serving at a housing project in Everett, Washington when the 57-year -old history of the Chapel Car Ministry was concluded in 1948.

### **Car #7 Grace**

The final car to be constructed was Car #7, Grace, built in 1915 at a cost of \$21,000. It is now on display at the American Baptist Assembly in Green Lake, Wisconsin.

Grace was the gift of Mr. & Mrs. B. F. Conaway and Mr. & Mrs Otis Birch of Los Angeles in honor of Grace Conaway. It was dedicated at the meetings of the Northern Baptist Convention in Los Angeles in 1915.

Grace served in the Western United States, mostly in California, Nevada, Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah. Its final service was in Orem, Utah from 1943 to 1946 where it provided a ministry to workers at a World War II steel mill. The last worship service in the car at Orem was on February 3, 1946. The car was then moved to Denver where repairs were made in preparation for its final journey to Green Lake where it was to be placed on display as a memorial to the Chapel Car Ministries.

Grace arrived in Chicago in mid-April. On April 22, 1946, a final worship service was held in the car, on a siding in the Burlington Railroad Yards, with Chicago Baptists participating. The car was then taken to the city of Green Lake by rail. From there it was transported by truck via Highway 23 to the American Baptist Assembly. It entered the grounds at the east gate and was moved to the Abbey area next to Oberlin Lodge, as a part of the then Rural Church Center where it remained for the next 36 years. In

May 1982 the car was moved from the Abbey area to its present location in the Luther Wesley Smith Conference area.

Over the years various individuals and groups have renovated Grace, making it a popular site for Bible study, worship, devotions, and other small group meetings. Children and adults enjoy touring the inside of this historic train car.

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*Some of the above information was taken from "On The Rails With The Gospel" by R. Dean Goodwin (a brochure); the scrap book of Boston Smith, and the Annual Report of the American Baptist Publication Society, 1914.*

### ***The Missionaries***

Grace may be unique in the annals of Chapel Car history in that only three missionary couples served on the car during its 32 years of service. They were:

Rev. and Mrs. E. R. Hermiston  
July 1915 - April 1924

Rev. and Mrs. A. C. Blinzinger  
April 1924 - October 1943

Rev. and Mrs. Howard Parry  
October 1943 - April 1946

Such service is remarkable when you consider the living conditions, both in the car and at the locations in which they served, not to mention the indifferent or even hostile attitudes which often greeted their arrival in a community. Their commitment is even more significant when one realizes that all three couples first served on other smaller cars, either the Evangel or the Emmanuel, before coming to Grace.

### ***In Conclusion***

When the first car was dedicated in 1891, Mr. Boston Smith said, "Surely God's hand is in this." Thousands of converts, hundreds of churches organized by chapel car missionaries, and numerous Christian leaders who first heard the Gospel in a chapel car are living witnesses that Mr. Smith's vision of a chapel car ministry . . . was from God.

### ***~ The Cars ~***

	Dedicated
Car #1 Evangel	May 23, 1891
Car #2 Emmanuel	May 26, 1893
Car #3 Glad Tidings	May 25, 1894
Car #4 Goodwill	June 1, 1895
Car #5 Messenger of Peace	May 21, 1898
Car #6 Herald of Hope	May 27, 1900
Car #7 Grace	May 21, 1915