

Granger Brethren Church Of Granger, Texas

Historical narrative by Mrs. Elsie Barton

The first Czech Protestant immigrants began moving into the Granger area of Williamson County in the early 1880's, a time when the emigration of families from Moravia to Texas began to accelerate. [1] The oppressive conditions in the Austrian Empire, of which Moravia was a part, and the glowing reports from friends in Texas who had left the homeland earlier were two of the main reasons for the emigration. [2] Most of these early immigrants were from rural communities and settled on farmlands around the San Gabriel River in this mostly blackland region, working very hard to establish themselves in the new land.

The worship services these Czechs were able to hold at first were few and far between. The first service was held in the 1880's in the Friendship school east of Granger and was conducted by the Rev. Henry Juren of Fayetteville. The family names at that time were Pavel Machu, Martin Machu, John Wentrcek, John Simek, Josef Martinets, Josef Mikus, Josef Zajicek and Josef Halas. [3] Family names from nearby Corn Hill were Josef Mikulencak, Tom Mrazek, and Charles Wentrcek. [4] Later the Rev. Bohumil Lacjak of Wesley conducted a few services until his death in a tragic accident; after that the services were discontinued altogether for a time. Most of the families had brought Bibles, hymnbooks, and prayers from Europe and had worship in their homes.

On May 28, 1892, the Rev. Adolf Chlumsky of Brenham, who had immigrated to Texas in 1887, performed the wedding ceremony for Josef J. Mikulencak and Anna Zarsky. At this wedding the Rev. Chlumsky encouraged the folks attending to organize a Brethren congregation. The result was that Josef Mikulencak, Sr. (father of the groom) and Pavel Machu made arrangements for the first service to be held on July 10th of that same year in the Moravia School. The school was located four miles southeast of Granger and had come into existence largely through the efforts of the same Pavel Machu. At that first service the congregation was formally organized and the Rev. Chlumsky was elected pastor. The family names added to the ones given above were Josef Labaj, George Labaj, John Simecek, Tom Machan, Josef Masar, John Holy, Pavel Simcik, Steve Batla, Josef Barina, P. Balusek, Frank Balusek, Tom Mrazek, Martin Vitek, John Vitek, Josef Vitek, Frank Holubec, Josef Holubec, John P. Trlica, Phillip Huser, Joser Huser, J.F. Hruska, Josef, Vinc, Frank, and John Dusek, Frank Bobalik, and John Zurek. [5]

The congregation did well, even though services were held only six times a year at first and the pastor had to come in by train from Brenham. The members were eager to build a church; their itinerant pastor, however, did not think it was a good idea right at that time and advised against it. What a shock he experienced the next time he came to Granger! Without his knowledge, the members had built a new church. It stood on the western edge of town, located across the road from Granger's Catholic church. [6] The members had selected a building committee, pledged \$500.00 immediately, and had gone to work doing all the labor themselves. The latter included hauling large boulders for the foundation from some of the distant hills. The building committee included J.F. Martinets, J.R. Machu, J.H. Wentrcek, Josef F. Wentrcek, John T. Machu, K. Martinets, and J.J. Mikulencak. [7] At the dedication service held on September 22, 1901, the members and their pastor rejoiced that their house of worship was completely paid for and that they were able to sing at that special service to the accompaniment of a new organ. [8]

It was only two years later, on December 29, 1903, that the Granger Brethren Church became the birthplace of the denomination when the Unity of the Brethren, first called the Evangelical Unity of the Czech-Moravian Brethren in North America, was organized there. Twenty-two delegates from 11 congregations and preaching stations of the Czech Brethren in Texas gathered to form a unified church body after having been inspired by the writings of the Rev. Chlumsky who was publishing the Bratske Listy (Brethren Journal). It was he and the Granger members who provided much of the impetus for such a significant and challenging step.

After Rev. Chlumsky had given 18 years of dedicated service to the Granger church and community (all this time commuting from his farm near Brenham) and at the same time serving and organizing a number of other Czech Brethren congregations throughout Texas, he resigned at 68 years of age.

The newly ordained Rev. Josef Barton, Sr., 24 years of age, became the congregation's first resident pastor in 1910 and served for over 35 until his death on August 28, 1945. The young pastor was also an immigrant from Moravia who did his theological studies in the United States and was the first student of the denomination. A long line of pastors have followed him, some resident and some non-resident. They include Josef Begat, Vaclav Vavrina, Gordon A. Hejl, Jesse Skrivanek, Frank Simcik, Glenn Jurek, Eugene Kotrla, Josef A. Barton (son of the elder Barton), Daniel J. Marek, and the present pastor, Gordon A. Hejl, who in 1983 began serving the congregation a second time around. [9] In that same year of 1910 when the new resident pastor, the Rev. Josef Barton, Sr., began his long pastorate, the Granger Brethren bought a parsonage jointly with the neighboring Taylor Brethren congregation (also served by the young minister for the same 35 years). Three years later, in 1913, this first parsonage was sold and replaced with a somewhat larger house. [10] After this residence burned in 1950, a new parsonage was built in the same place in 1953. [11]

The church itself has been enlarged and remodeled several times. In 1924 a Sunday School section was added. [12] Then, in 1938 a thorough remodeling was done on the building after a decision had been made by the members that, rather than build a new church, they preferred to remodel the old church, the historic place where the Unity of the Brethren in Texas was established in 1903. John Marcon drew the plans, and the members donated 300 days of work, while also giving their financial support. The building committee included J.H. Huser, F.E. Martinets, Joe E. Mikulencak, Frank Labaj, Mrs. Henry Labaj, Ella Dusek, and August Holubec. [13]

On June 11, 1950, the congregation dedicated a fellowship hall which originally was a center-cut of a hospital ward brought from Camp Swift Government Surplus at Bastrop, Texas. [14] In the 1980's an annex was added to connect the fellowship hall with the church building itself, thereby making the whole place more practical and comfortable.

Two cemeteries have served as the resting places of a majority of the members of the Granger Brethren Church, the Machu Cemetery and the official church cemetery. The Machu Cemetery preceded the church cemetery by 33 years, having been established 9 years before the congregation itself was organized. Its beginning came as an act of generosity and good will of Pavel Machu, who was sometimes called the patriarch of the early Granger-area Czech Protestants. [15] As Mr. Machu was returning to his farm from Granger on horseback one day in 1883, he met a woman and several children in a wagon. She was in great distress trying to find a burial place for her husband whose body she carried in the back of the wagon. She had been refused burial for him in two cemeteries and did not know what to do, Mr. Machu was shocked at her plight. Right then he decided to invite her to his farm where he would provide a burial site for her husband. He allotted a plot of three acres for a cemetery which came to be called the Machu Cemetery. In 1975 this cemetery had to be relocated by the U.S. Corps of Army Engineers to a new site near the church cemetery one mile east of Granger. At the time of the dedication at the new site, the cemetery had one unmarked grave and 135 marked graves. [16]

On Nov. 17, 1916, the Granger Brethren congregation purchased two acres of land from M. Schramm for the church cemetery. This site is located about a mile east of Granger and adjoins the Catholic Cemetery to the north and the city cemetery to the west. Early purchases of plots were made by the Vitek, Labaj, Stefka, Mikulencak, and Holubec families. The first burial is believed to be that of Frantiska Janyska, who died on June 11, 1917. 17 Four ministers of the Unity of the Brethren are buried in the cemetery: the Rev. Adolf Chlumsky who died in 1919, the Rev. Josef Barton, Sr., 1945, the Rev. Vaclav Vavrina, 1950, and the Rev. Josef A. Barton, 1979.

Besides being the birthplace of the Unity of the Brethren in Texas, the Granger Brethren Church also played a vital role in the founding of the Hus School, a Christian training school for young people and a valued tradition and institution of the denomination. The first class of 18 young people, held in 1914 for eight weeks, was hosted by the congregation and directed and instructed by the Rev. Josef Barton, Sr., the local pastor, and the Rev. Josef Hegar. [18] The congregation hosted a number of other classes after that first one.

The Granger Brethren Church has also contributed three native sons to the ministry of the Unity of the Brethren: Josef A. Barton, son of the Rev. Josef Barton, Sr.; Thomas Tallas (now the president of the Synodical Board of the denomination); and Terry Loessin, great-great-great grandson of Pavel Machu. The present pastor, Gordon A. Hejl, married a native daughter of the congregation who was the niece of the Rev. Josef Barton, Sr. Another native son, Rev. Albert Dusek, served in another denomination.

In other areas of life, Christian education has played a strong role in the Granger church. In the early days Ceske Skoly (Czech schools) were held in the summers; these were designed to teach the basics of the Czech language along with the Christian teaching. As early as 1902 the Rev. Chlumsky reports in the Bratske Listy (Brethren Journal) on preparations being made for a Czech school to be held that summer; Mr. W. Otta was to be the teacher and about 30 students were expected to attend. [19] Later the Rev. Josef Barton, Sr., taught a Czech summer school in the church every summer, beginning in 1907 while he was still a seminary student. [20] As the years passed these Czech summer schools evolved into confirmation training classes and Bible study classes, with less and less emphasis on the teaching of the Czech language. The most important factor in Christian education in the congregation, however, since the earliest years, has been the Sunday School --and continues to be that to this day.

The women's group, called the Christian Sisters, was organized in 1904 with 20 members and has functioned as a vital organization these 88 years. Music, singing, and choirs have played an essential part in the worship and also in the training of the children. The local unit of the Mutual Aid Society (a benevolent organization of the denomination), the young people's organizations, known by various names through the years, and other organizations have served to broaden the work and effectiveness of the Granger Brethren congregation as it has nurtured the faith of its own people and reached out to the community in a spirit of service. As inevitable changes have come, the congregation has made the effort to respond to the changing needs of individuals, families, the community, the wider Christian church, and the world.

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http://www.williamson-county-historical-commission.org/Granger/Granger_Brethren_Church_Historical_Marker_Granger_Texas.html