1975

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The Mayor Met the Evangelist at 7 A.M.

When Bill Sunday, Sister Aimee and Babe Ruth all shook up Tampa at the same time in 1919.

By HAMPTON DUNN

The dusty sawdust trails of ebullient Billy Sunday and curvacious Aimee Semple McPherson crossed in Tampa in the bouncy spring of 1919.

At that time the colorful ex-baseball player, the Rev. Dr. William Ashley Sunday, was regarded as "the greatest revivalist in American history, perhaps the greatest since the days of the apostles." He was 54 years old.
Billy Sunday - Photograph by Carl Blakeslee, made in April, 1919, during the first campaign of Mr. Sunday. Headquarters and Tabernacle were located on the area just south of the Lafayette Street bridge.

Sister Aimee Semple McPherson wowed ‘em in Tampa in 1919, then went on to national fame at her Angelus Temple in Los Angeles.

Marse Joe McCarthy, manager of the New York Yankees and Babe Ruth in St. Petersburg.
On the other hand, the ambitious young Sister Aimee was just a barn-storming novice with an old jalopy, a tent, a "message", and a flair for press-agentry - she billed herself as "The World's Most Pulchritudinous Evangelist."

Everything was "the most" in those days, the period which was the lull between storms - between the dark, drab days of World War I and the bright, happy footloose days of the "Roarin'20s" then just about to begin. This was an era when Floridians, like Americans everywhere, wanted to kick up their heels, craved excitement and demanded large doses of thrills in everything: jazz music, sexy shows, sensational newspapers, booze orgies, extreme flapper dress, noisy real estate promotions, and - religion.

"Evangelist With Sex Appeal"
Looking backward, the Tampa newspapers of the day were filled with glowing reports on flamboyant Billy's capture of the city, but no mention is made of the lady sometimes billed as the "Evangelist with Sex Appeal." It was a biographer of Sunday, William G. McLoughlin, Jr., who revealed about the pair of preachers hitting Tampa at the same time.

In his book, "Billy Sunday Was His Real Name", the biographer recorded that Sunday was "hostile to her (Aimee's) sensationalism, her flowing robes, and her tendency to melodramatize her sex."

But, he wrote, Sunday did not object to the Four Square doctrines of "God's Greatest Saleswoman" or to her "faith healing." In fact, Sunday's wife, affectionately known as "Ma" Sunday, told the author "Mr. Sunday sometimes wished he had the gift of healing."

"According to his wife," McLoughlin recounted, "Sunday refused to allow Mrs. McPherson to sit on the platform during his campaign in Tampa, Florida, in 1919, when she, too, was holding a revival in that city and was being escorted to the bathing beaches by Rhodeheaver."

"The Little Office Girl"
Rhodeheaver was Homer Rhodeheaver, the great gospel singer and trombonist just back from France where he sang for the troops who had gone "over the top." "Rhody" was a member of Sunday's team which gripped Tampa for four emotion-filled weeks in March and April in 1919.

(Sister Aimee herself claimed to be no healer but "only the little office girl who opens the door and says, 'Come in.'" She was blunt in asking her followers to fill the collection pans with "quiet money," i.e., currency not coins. After leaving Tampa, she took her tambourine and tent to Los Angeles, opened up famed Angelus Temple and became wealthy and newsworthy).

The impact of the controversial Billy Sunday's visit on the Florida West Coast was foretold from the outset of the campaign. Billy told the throngs which packed his tabernacle tent near Plant Field that he knew Tampa was "a good town" because the Mayor met him at the railroad station and because a group of top businessmen sacrificed and got up to greet his train at 7 A.M. When this happens, Billy happily reported, "Then there's something doing." The Mayor at the time was the late D. B. McKay, a newspaper publisher and thrice Chief Executive of the city.
Contemporary reports of the evangelist's visit indicate that he did indeed shake up the city like it had never been before, or possibly since. Sunday had paid a previous visit to Tampa, in 1914, his purpose avowed to the Rev. W. J. Carpenter was to see what he "could do with the immoral and negligent in Tampa." A list published in 1914 showed Sunday had held revivals in Daytona Beach, Jacksonville, St. Augustine and Tampa. He also made an encore appearance in Tampa in 1924.

When the effervescent Sunday died in Chicago in 1935, The Tampa. Tribune recalled his visits to Florida, and editorially mourned, "It can be said that Billy Sunday did no harm in the world and did much good."

This may sound like a cautious statement, but it was quite a concession because of the controversy which swirled around the balding head of the evangelist who had been characterized "as everything from a rabble-rousing, moneymaking mountebank to an anointed apostle of God."

"Money-making is one of the first things people who don't know Sunday talk about" was the way Dr. Sol C. Dickey, manager of the Winona Lake Bible Conference explained it to a group of Tampans preparing for the Sunday campaign.
Tampa’s "Love Gift"

Dr. Dickey outlined that Sunday took only the offerings of the last day of the campaign. After expenses were raised, no other offerings were taken. Some of the last day’s collections were right hefty, such as the one in New York where Sunday visited a short time before coming to Tampa. The offering amounted to $120,000, and Dr. Dickey said in that situation Sunday took nothing for himself and split the $120,000 on a 50-50 basis, giving half to the Red Cross and the other half to the Y.M.C.A.

The "love gift" on the last day of the Tampa crusade was $6,094.

Billy pounded hard on getting money to meet expenses. There had been a rumor around town that the City Council had appropriated $2,000 and that a $10,000 purse had been made up as a guarantee.

At one point in the Tampa meet, he shouted, "The fellow who said I had to be guaranteed so much before I came here was a liar and he knew it when he said it! The same old lies of the whiskey-soaked bunch I have been fighting for years.

"And because a man gets a little money for preaching, people say he is a damn grafter."

Dempsey Becomes Champ

Sunday recounted the compensation of men in other lines of work - Jess Willard, for instance, who would draw an enormous purse for standing up before Jack Dempsey. "And," Sunday predicted, "I think Jack will knock the tar out of him at that." The evangelist also mentioned the names of Charlie Chaplin with a million dollars for eight pictures, Doug Fairbanks, Mary Pickford and others.

(Billy’s prognostication was correct: On July 4,1919, in Toledo, Dempsey became heavyweight champion by knocking the tar out of Willard, who failed to answer the bell for the fourth round).

In a special appeal to women for money, the evangelist suggested: "If your old husbands don’t give you anything, go through his pockets tonight and I'll pray for the Lord to forgive you."

As collections dragged, Sunday chided Tampans saying that when the campaign "in the little bit of a town of St. Augustine" had progressed as far as it had in Tampa, the people there had given $500 more than had been given in Tampa it and the tent was a lot smaller at that.

"Pusillanimous and Parsimonious."

Of the Tampa crowds, Billy cooed: "Fine audiences, but gee! you're a stingy bunch and your offerings are pusillanimous and parsimonious." He also hurled barrages at the man and the woman "riding in limousines and dropping nickels in the collection plate," and beseeched them to "Tote fair with God."

Local leaders also thumped for financial support. One with the distinguished lawyer, W. F. Himes, who said, "I do not consider whatever offering is given Mr. Sunday is given to him alone. I consider it also an offering to God, and if your giving is in proportion to the good he has done it
The Sunday party lived in style while campaigning in tropical Tampa. They stayed at the nearby plush Tampa Bay Hotel and the former athlete would sprint from Plant Field to his quarters to keep in physical shape. The reporter for The Tribune described Sunday as "the most contagious individual that ever pounded the carpets of the halls of the Tampa Bay Hotel." Once during his stay he preached to his fellow guests at the palatial inn and when the season ended, the management permitted Sunday to continue to use his room until the campaign closed.

The Cheapest Tipper
A not-so-complimentary description of the evangelist at the Tampa Bay was written by the sarcastic Westbrook Pegler in 1942. It went like this:

"... A headwaitress in the old Tampa Bay Hotel said he (Sunday) was the cheapest tipper she had ever seen and she had waited on many ball clubs which don't run a high score in that respect. It was a good furlong from the kitchen to Sunday's big round table, where he fed his staff, and the little girls would lug in great tonnage of those heavy old-style hotel plates and the boats which went with the American plan meals and cover much mileage in the course of three meals a day. The headwaitress said Bill's standard tip was a dime a head, although, in his store, if the people didn't shower down he would give them the devil for a lot of cheap skates trying to mooch their way to heaven."

Sunday, who had starred in professional baseball before his conversion, maintained his identity with the sport. Often he'd rush from his tent to Plant Field, and there he'd umpire the Spring training games of the big leaguers. He also tossed the first ball from the pitcher's box that led the way for the Boston Red Sox to clout a 5 to 3 victory over the New York Giants.

Longest Home Run
It was during that game a historic event took place. Babe Ruth, then "a youth to fortune and to fame unknown," smacked out the longest home run on record. The ball traveled 587 feet and the record stands to this day. When the ball was returned to the Big Bambino, he autographed it and gave it to his pal, Billy Sunday.

The night after the big game, and home run record, according to The Tampa Tribune, the next day, Sunday would preach with such appeal 300 would give up their wayward ways and answer his call.

In the quaint news writing style of the day, Staff Writer Mac Parker would put it this way in The Tribune's page one, lead story the next day:

"Another cargo of spiritual life preservers was tossed to the masses by Billy Sunday at his two sermons yesterday and 300 eager hands clung to the lines again last night. For a solid week he has been anchoring buoys to mark the rocks and dangerous places in men's and women's lives, great black and white striped buoys, and slowly but surely the way has been working down the straight and narrow path toward salvation. Many are turning from the roads leading to the
swamps and the dungeons and the pits of hell to march this new road Billy Sunday has pointed out."

The tempo of the times was not overlooked by the preacher. "America," he cried, "is becoming absolutely nuts over pleasure, and everything's a joke from marriage down. Hear me, when out of every 12 marriages in the U. S. seven wind up in divorce, there's something rotten somewhere. The little girl in short dresses knows more about sin than her 75-year-old grandmother. She's got her backed off the boards and pawing for air."

Sunday raked church members and leaders as well as the unsaved. One night he ripped into them, saying, "What we want is stewards that will stew and not make a muss of the stew; and deacons who will deac for Jesus Christ, and church dignitaries that will dig for God, and not for the devil."

### God's Worst Enemy

Sunday saved his heaviest blows for the "damnable, hellish, vile, corrupt, iniquitous liquor business." He claimed that in New York City "this Godforsaken whiskey gang raised $500,000 to get me. I say to them 'Come on, you God-forsaken, weasel-eyed, white-liveried, black-hearted gang of thugs. Come on. I defy you.' I've put them out of two million dollars worth of business. I ask no quarter and I give none. None. Absolutely none. None whatever. None."

A year after leaving Tampa, Billy Sunday preached the mock funeral sermon for "John Barleycorn" at a celebration in Norfolk, Va., marking passage of the 18th Amendment.

"Good-bye John," he snarled. "You were God's worst enemy. You were Hell's best friend ... the reign of tears is over. The slums soon will be only a memory. We will turn our prisons into factories and our jails into storehouses and cribs. Men will walk upright now, women will smile and the children will laugh. Hell will be forever for rent."

Long after leaving Tampa, Sunday's "image" in the community was favorable. After his death in November, 1935, The Tampa Tribune penned an editorial obituary which summed up the feeling of Sunday's friends: "We believe that Billy Sunday's service, however his contemporaries may have criticized or condemned it, will receive that heavenly reward the Master promises those who do His work on earth."
About the Author

HAMPTON DUNN

Hampton Dunn is a native Florida "Cracker," having been born and reared in Citrus County. He attended Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, and the University of Tampa.

For 22 years he was on the staff of The Tampa Daily Times, starting as a cub reporter, and was its Managing Editor when the newspaper merged with The Tampa Tribune in 1958. He was author of a popular political column, "Palm Tree Politics." During World War II, Dunn was on leave from his paper and served overseas in the Mediterranean Theatre with the U.S. Air Force. He was decorated for his services in covering the war front as a public relations officer, and held the rank of Major when the war ended.

Hampton Dunn for two years was a political commentator and news analyst on Television Station WCKT-TV in Miami. He returned to Tampa after that as an executive of the Peninsula Motor Club (AAA), and is now vice president of the organization and editor of its monthly magazine Florida Explorer which goes to the 260,000 AAA members.

A prolific free lance writer, Dunn is the author of eight books on Florida history - including "Yesterday's Tampa," now in its fifth printing. He writes a weekly historical column for The Tampa Tribune - Tampa limes and contributes to numerous newspapers and magazines.

His journalistic efforts have brought many awards to Dunn. In 1946 he received the Associated Press Award for writing the best news story in Florida, for his coverage of the Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings invasion of privacy trial. He was the 1970 winner of the Florida Historical Society award of merit for excellence in presentation of Florida history in the media for his monthly articles in Florida Trend Magazine, for which he wrote more than 10 years. In 1974, Dunn was given the Florida Award for Distinguished Service in Florida History by the Peace River Valley Historical Society. Other honors included the Torch Award of the Citrus County Chamber of Commerce, the Jefferson Davis Medal of the Florida Division of United Daughters of Confederacy, the Outstanding Service Award of the Dick Pope Chapter of Florida Public Relations Association, and the Cooper-Taylor Award for Traffic Safety of the Jaycees in 1974.

Hampton Dunn is active in many historical groups. He is past president of the Tampa Historical Society, and served as a charter Trustee of both the Historic Pensacola Preservation Board and the Historic Tallahassee Preservation Board, state wide agencies, by gubernatorial appointment.
He is in demand as a public speaker and averages a lecture a day, many times on Florida historical subjects. He is on the board of the Hillsborough County Museum.

Also active in numerous civic organizations, Dunn is a past president of the downtown Tampa Rotary Club and past District Governor of Rotary International District 696 covering the Florida Suncoast.