

Free Methodists helped settle Hermon at turn of the century

(In commemoration of the third annual Highland Park Cultural Festival which continues today and tomorrow, Greg Hart and Cecil Smidderks write of the early days of the community of Hermon—Editor.)

By Greg Hart and
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"All out for the Holy City," the driver of the Pacific Electric red car would cry as he stopped at the corner of Pasadena Avenue (Figueroa and Avenue 60 in the 1920's and 1930's. He was referring to Hermon, probably one of the most historically, culturally, and geographically distinct communities in Highland Park at that time. Hermon's unique history was set into motion shortly after the turn of the century. At that time members of the Southern California conference of the Free Methodist Church, led by Rev. C. B. Ebey, recognized the need to establish a school in the southwest which would "give attention to the moral and spiritual as well as the intellectual development of our youth." When Mr. Ralph Rogers, a citizen of L.A., learned of the plans for the school, he agreed to donate a school site and one hundred adjacent residence lots. The lots were placed on the market and sold to interested families, raising several thousand dollars for building purposes.

BARREN FIELDS

Joining those in Southern California were several families from the midwest who moved to Los Angeles as pioneers to help establish the new school. Many of these people were brought together in the summer of 1903 at an old fashioned camp meeting and conference held in Sycamore Grove Park. When a group of these people trekked northward up the Arroyo Seco to the future site of the school they found themselves in a picturesque valley surrounded by what are now known as the Monterey Hills. However the scene did not look encouraging. They saw barren fields, the old Cycle Way, and an unkempt golf course with a club house as the only building in the area. However this did not deter them from enthusiastically helping to complete the plans for the school. Work began on the building toward the end of

1903. As a reminder of their heritage the Free Methodists called the valley in which their school would be located, Hermon, after the Biblical Mt. Hermon of Palestine.

During the summer of 1904 those who planned, struggled, sacrificed, labored, and prayed for the establishment of the school were rewarded by the completion of the building. With a basement and two stories it was situated on a hill overlooking Highland Park and the San Gabriel Mountain Range

beyond. It was called Los Angeles Seminary. School opened in the fall with seventy students (many of them boarding students) from primary grades through high school and six consecrated teachers. Within two years the student body had grown to 123. Today the school is called Pacific Christian High School and it serves grades 7 through 12.

THIRD LANDMARK

Rapid population growth and settlement in Hermon followed the establishment of the school. Within one year over fifty houses had been built in the community. A large percentage of their inhabitants were Free Methodists. This led to the building of a second major landmark in the valley — the Hermon Free Methodist Church — which held its first services in 1905. It is located on the corner of Monterey Road and Wheeling Way.

Not surprisingly the rapid growth of the community led to the need for a public school for those who could not afford or did not desire private Christian education. Thus a third important landmark joined the church and the "Sem." It taught students up through eighth grade for many years. Located on Bushnell Way, it opened in 1905 and was known as the Hermon School for much of its early history. Today it is called Bushnell Way Elementary School.

It is interesting that the three institutions most responsible for shaping Hermon's early history, the "Sem," the Church, and the public school, are all nearly connected by one short road cutting across the heart of the valley in an east-west direction. This road is Wheeling Way. The Hermon School was near its west end with the "Sem" at its east terminus and the church in the middle. These three landmarks are

portrayed on the new mural at the intersection of Monterey Road and Via Marisol.

A further look at several street names in Hermon testifies to the historical and geographic distinctiveness of the community. Hermon Avenue (now Via Marisol) shared the name of the church, the public school, and the community itself. Meanwhile Wheeling Way derived its name from the purpose it originally served as part of a bike path from Los Angeles to South Pasadena. The walnut trees growing on the hill forming the southwest boundary of the community inspired the name Walnut Hill road. It has since been renamed Monterey Road. Bushnell Way was named in honor of two sisters, Rose and Mary Bushnell, who served as principal and teacher at the public school for many, many years. In addition, the

streets Ebey, Coleman, Kendall, and Terrill were all named after early Free Methodist leaders, with Rev. C. B. Ebey being the founder of L.A. Seminary. Finally Redfield was named after an eastern evangelist closely associated with the Free Methodists.

DUAL COMMITMENT

During its early years Hermon was an unusually closeknit community considering its location within the larger city of Los Angeles. There are two main reasons for this. One is geographic and the other is cultural. The geographic reason for this unity is easy to understand and is still somewhat apparent today. The young community grew up in a valley surrounded on three sides by hills and bounded on its fourth side by a river, the Arroyo Seco. This isolated Hermon and set it apart physically. During its first years the community had only one road leading out of the valley. A large wooden bridge at Avenue 60 crossed the Arroyo Seco, providing a link to Highland Park and the rest of the outside world.

Although geography explains why Hermon was physically distinct from the rest of Highland Park it does not explain the unity and closeness that most of its early inhabitants experienced. Perhaps this closeknitness can be best understood by the symbols of the two landmark Free Methodist in-

stitutions in the valley. Both the church and the "Sem" had bells which could be heard throughout the

valley as well as over on the "Ave"-Figueroa. When the school bell rang in the morning students

knew it was time to head up the hill to the "Sem"—many huffing and puffing so as not to be late. On Sundays the church bell would communicate another message. However there were special occasions when the bells were rung in unison or alternately as if in conversation. Nevertheless, together they served as a constant reminder to the community of the Free Methodists' dual commitment to Christian education and Christian worship. No wonder the red car driver called Hermon the "Holy City."