

Bloody Sunday

Radical evangelist's message didn't sit well with Springfield

"I came to Springfield to make the prostitute pure, to redeem the drunkard and to make things good," said "baseball evangelist" Billy Sunday when he preached here in 1909.

Ninety-seven years ago this spring, the city was quaking from six weeks of hellfire and damnation sermons given by Sunday, a rougher version of Billy Graham. Sunday had played professional baseball for the Chicago White Stockings and was a drinker, but gave up both while attending a mission service.

From then on, he saved sinners from drink, cards and dancing. His anti-booze sermons helped influence Prohibition, according to Wikipedia online.

Springfield had plenty of sinning then. The race riots had ripped the town apart just months before and there were saloons, drunkards and gambling joints aplenty.

"The (city) ministers went together and followed Mr. Sunday around different places and listened to him, and they were determined they were going to get him here for Springfield, to see if they couldn't break up this terrible thing here ... The saloons were getting pretty strong, you know," Edith Anderson Butler stated in her 1974

oral history for the University of Illinois at Springfield. Butler, a Springfieldian, was one of Sunday's singers.

When Sunday appeared here, it was early in his career. The fiery speaker, known for his plain, even rough, language and acrobatic gestures, had just begun hitting the evangelical road.

To prepare for his month-and-a-half stint here, supporters built a huge tabernacle at the northwest corner of First and Adams streets, according to a souvenir program in the Lincoln Library's Sangamon Valley Collection. It seated thousands. While accounts differ, supposedly between 400,000 and 600,000 people attended Sunday's Springfield revivals; his last meeting alone drew 44,000.



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But the revivals didn't start well. Sunday's preaching methods were "unlike many others," boasted his program, and promised "absolute accuracy" and "language that everybody can understand."

"We couldn't believe a preacher would get up and talk like that!"

said Butler, who sang at many of his revivals. "He said over and over again, 'You know the reason I talk like that is because that guy right down there on the front seat — they're all drunkards — they're here out of curiosity to see what's going on, and that's their language, and I am talking their language!'"

His language didn't sit well with one man during Sunday's first appearance, on Feb. 26, 1909.

"Billy Sunday was attacked while on the platform last night by a man armed with a long buggy whip ..." reported the Illinois

State Journal the next day.

"We were standing up on the pulpit with Mr. Sunday," recalled Butler, who was singing for Sunday with her husband that night. "And all of a sudden — just that quick — something flashed and hit that light over our heads and we all thought it was a shot. Immediately Mr. Sunday — just that quick — jumped down off that high platform onto the main floor."

The Journal: "The first meeting of the series nearly ended in riot when members of the infuriated audience attacked the intruder."

Sunday "rained blows on the man's head" while "others helped Sunday hold him ... Excited voices cried 'kill him' and men madened for the moment struck at (him), pulled his hair or endeavored to tear his clothing from his body."

The man, "with bleeding face, clothing torn, and badly bruised about the body, was hurried away in the police patrol."

In jail, the attacker was identified as Sherman Potts. He called himself a "United States home missionary," the paper said.

"I believe that religion is warfare. We believe that the preacher must be blameless before he starts preaching to others ..." Potts said he had followed Sunday for months, trying to attack him.

"I went after Sunday because he used naughty language before young virgins. He called women prostitutes before little girls ...," he said.

Potts was considered insane and locked up.

Meanwhile, Sunday tended to his ankle, which was badly sprained from jumping off the platform.



Courtesy of the Sangamon Valley Collection
The Rev. Billy Sunday was attacked in Springfield in 1909 during one of his fire-and-brimstone sermons.

"Mr. Sunday had to be on crutches the rest of the time he was here, but he would stand up — he would put his knee, his leg, right up on that chair that was there for him to sit on, and stand there and do his preaching," Butler said.

Sunday died a "wealthy man" in 1935, according to Wikipedia. He left his mark on Springfield. Supporters established the Washington Street Mission after his speeches here.

Springfield left its mark on Sunday, too. When his wife, Helen, visited the Mission on Jan. 10, 1938, the Journal asked if she remembered his revival here years ago.

"I certainly do remember Springfield," she said. "This is the only place Mr. Sunday ever received a horse whipping."

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