

The Sanctified Community
Of
Bethany Church, Clay County, Kansas

HIST 558: History of Kansas

By: Alexandra Richmeier

In the words of Mable Dunham, the esteemed Bethany, KS community “gossip” columnist, on “January 1, 1945—Sunday School attendance was 31, collection, \$2.22. The Primary class gave the special numbers. Rev. and Mrs. D. L. Kolb and Mary Caroline returned home Saturday from a week’s visit with relatives at Orlando, Ok...”¹ Her words give a brief glimpse into the weekly activities of Bethany residents during the first half of the twentieth century. This primarily agriculture focused group formed close bonds and centered their activities around Bethany Church—for which the Clay County community was named.

The origin and exact date of the Bethany Church congregation is difficult to determine, because most information regarding the church was handed down by “word of mouth” prior to 1900.² These word of mouth accounts date back to the 1870s and describe “revivals” and other “religious efforts” that took place weekly in the District 93 Schoolhouse.³ A permanent church building was eventually built at the cost of \$1600 during the winter of 1904-1905. Prominent members of the community, including the Dunham family, donated most of the labor.⁴ Bethany Church was a social center for many families living in the rural outskirts of Clay Center, KS. Traveling to the main hub of Clay Center was an entire day affair. The close proximity of the church allowed the families to fulfill their social and religious needs all in one place—closer to their homes than Clay Center.

Bethany Church was used for a variety of events, such as “weddings, revivals, accessions and conversions.”⁵ The organized Ladies Aid provided a strong base of

leadership in the church.⁶ They helped establish Sunday school events and other youth related activities. Other members of the congregation also actively gathered together to make things happen for their church. In 1925, they were able to earn the funds necessary to purchase a piano within one week.⁷ The Bethany Church community was determined not to sit idly by when action was needed. This active role is most notable in the convergence of Bethany Church and Hillside Church.

The relationship between Bethany Church and Hillside Church can best be understood in the terms of siblings. For 65 years, the churches shared a pastor. In the early 1960's, faced with shrinking congregations, the current pastor "led effort[s] to combine the Bethany and Hillside congregations" into one church.⁸ The Bethany-Hillside Evangelical United Brethren Church, as it came to be called, rotated weekly between the two church buildings to best meet the needs of the combined communities.⁹ This rotation between the two churches continued until the creation of the Milford Dam and the Ft. Riley expansions in 1965 forced the abandonment of the church buildings.

In 1965, the Bethany-Hillside Church relocated and joined forces with the Broughton Methodist Church community. The Broughton church was moved from Broughton to its current location between old Broughton and Leonardville, because the town site was to be flooded with the completion of the Milford Dam.¹⁰

Today, the combined church communities form the Countryside United Methodist Church. Although the land that Bethany Church once resided on is underwater, and the church has long since been demolished, the community is not lost. The spirit of the congregation lives on in Countryside Church, many of whose members still remember

worshiping in Bethany Church. Bethany's history and legacy also live on in the writings of Mabel Dunham, including her personal memoirs, weekly column in the Clay Center *Times* newspaper, and substantial efforts to preserve the history of Bethany Church while an active member. Even though the church cannot be visited today, filing through 60 year old documents and reading the stories of the people who lived in the area gives momentary insight into the love and devotion the community felt for their small rural Kansas church.

1.



Figure 1: Bethany Church (Aerial View), Clay County, Kansas.

Source: Circa 1950s; Binder Bethany-Hillside, Clay Center Historical Society, Clay Center, KS.

2.



Figure 2: The original church built in 1905. Bethany Church, Clay County, Kansas

Source: Circa 1905; can be found at Clay Center Historical Society.

3.



Figure 3: The Broughton Methodist Church purchased by Bethany-Hillside Congregation in April 1965. Broughton Methodist Church, Clay County, Kansas
 Source: Circa 1965; can be found at Clay Center Historical Society.

4.



Figure 4: Clay County, KS Map

Source: Clay Center, KS Historical Society Clay County Map circa 1895. <http://www.livgenmi.com/1895/KS/County/clay.htm>

End Notes

¹ Mabel Dunham, "Bethany," *Times* (Clay Center), KS, 1 January 1945.

² Mabel Dunham, "History of Bethany Church-Draft," Paper presented for the Anniversary Howe County Book of Bethany-Hillside Evangelical United Brethren Church. Binder Bethany-Hillside, Clay Center Historical Society, Clay Center, KS. July 1965, 2.

³ "History of Bethany Church-Draft," 1.

⁴ Mabel Dunham, "History of Bethany Church," Paper presented for the Anniversary Howe County Book of Bethany-Hillside Evangelical United Brethren Church, Binder Bethany-Hillside, Clay Center Historical Society, Clay Center, KS. July 1965.

⁵ "History of Bethany Church."

⁶ "History of Bethany Church-Draft," 3.

⁷ "History of Bethany Church."

⁸ "History of Bethany Church."

⁹ "History of Bethany Church."

¹⁰ M.J. Morgan, *Portrait of a Lost Town: Broughton, Kansas, 1869-1966* (Manhattan, Kansas: Chapman Center for Rural Studies, 2010), 89-90.