

By Rex Sexton

As we count our blessings on the 25th anniversary of the formation of the United Church of God, it is important to take a look back at the humble beginnings of this era of God's Church.

After dark on July 3, 1924, a road-weary Model T Ford drove up to the house of Horace Armstrong in Salem, Oregon. Arriving to visit with Horace, his wife and their two youngest children, 20-year-old twins Dwight and Mary, after an 18-day trip in the open-air vehicle were six people: Horace's son, Herbert, along with his wife, Loma, their two daughters, Beverly and Dorothy Jane, Loma's brother and sister-in-law, Walter and Bertha Dillon.

Herbert had established himself selling advertising and conducting surveys for newspapers, primarily in the Portland, Oregon area. The family rented a home in northeast Portland.

Just two years later, in the early autumn of 1926, Herbert's advertising business was nearly wiped out due to a national program requiring laundromats—the primary accounts of Mr. Armstrong's business—to cancel local advertising. At a time of near despair over the business collapse, Herbert and his family made another visit to his parents' place in Salem. Loma Armstrong made friends with a neighbor named Ora Runcorn, an avid student of the Bible. Mrs. Runcorn led Loma on a verse-by-verse scriptural study of the Sabbath, simply reading aloud the verses. Loma excitedly relayed this "new truth" to her husband.

As relayed in *The Autobiography of Herbert Armstrong*, he at first resisted the idea and set out to prove that "all these churches could not be wrong." Mr. Armstrong spent many days at the Portland Public



Left: Ben Light, pastor of Salem and Eugene, Oregon on the bridge at Dever Creek, where Herbert Armstrong was baptized.
Right: The Ira Curtis Home. Pictured are Ben Light and Mr. Calvin Cole, who kept Feasts in Belknap Springs, Oregon and attended the Scrael Hill church.

Library researching the existence of God, evolution and various Bible teachings. After months of Bible study and looking at the teachings of various churches, Mr. Armstrong made a decision:

"This church (The Church of God Seventh Day) came closer to the Bible qualifications than any I knew... I began to fellowship with their scattered and few members in Oregon... We were living in Portland at the time... but there was a sprinkling of them through the Willamette Valley between Salem and Eugene, in Oregon—mostly farmers... They welcomed the fellowship of myself and Mrs. Armstrong." (*Autobiography*, Volume 1, p. 358, 1986 ed.)

In the last months of 1926, the Armstrongs began attending with the small Church of God Seventh Day congregation near Jefferson, a small town a few miles south of Salem. Ministers from the Church of God Seventh Day traveled to smaller areas once a year for six-week Public Campaigns. That winter a pastor named E.A. Stith traveled from Meridian, Idaho to hold lectures near Jefferson. The lectures were held in a white wood frame schoolhouse north of Albany. The building later became the Morningstar Grange. It has been enlarged and is still in use today.

Member Mrs. Letty Benight and her daughter, Alice, also lived in Jefferson. Letty's grandparents had been in the Church of God Seventh Day when the Seventh Day Adventists broke off from them in 1863. Alice later married Charlie Henion, who had moved to Oregon in the 1930s from Oklahoma at about the same time as Otis and Nellie

Cole and the five Tierce sisters. The Coles had three sons who later served in the ministry. All five of the Tierce sisters married and raised their families in the Salem area. A number of their sons became pastors in later years. All the sisters were faithful to God's truth to the end.

I first met Mrs. Alice Henion in 1982. My wife, Patty, and our two children moved to the Albany area after the church hired me to serve as an assistant pastor working with Mr. David Mills in the Salem and Albany congregations. During the next three years I researched the events in Mr. Armstrong's book and tried to meet all the early church members who were still alive and in the area. Some were members of the Worldwide Church of God—others in the Church of God, Seventh Day were also friendly and willing to tell me their stories. Following is word for word, as I remember it and wrote it down, the account of Mr. Armstrong's baptism as told by Alice Henion. She was 13 years old at the time but said she could recall it as "clearly as yesterday:"

"Elder Stith, from Idaho, was here for six weeks of nightly meetings. The Armstrongs were staying in Salem with his parents, but came down here for every meeting. Mr. Armstrong and Elder Stith were engaged in intense conversation for a long time after each meeting, sometimes for over an hour. After about three weeks of the meetings had gone by, Elder Stith baptized Mr. Armstrong after one of the meetings. There was a wide place in Dever Creek that we used for baptisms and the entire group would go to watch and pray for the new one." Her account has been verified by her son, David Henion, who still lives in Jefferson, and a granddaughter of Elder Stith who lived in Spokane, Washington in the late 1980s.

Mr. Armstrong continued to study and grow in understanding. In the summer of 1928 he was

asked to give his first sermon. The subject was "The Sabbath Covenant" and was given at the meeting room used by the Jefferson congregation above the old Dever Store. The Ira Curtis family owned a home near Black Dog landing. In November of 1930, a church business meeting was held at their home and Mr. Armstrong was asked to attend (p. 409). After this meeting Mr. Armstrong was recognized as a leader and gradually was called into the ministry by Jesus Christ. The home is still standing, although it has suffered floods several times.

The Oregon Conference of the Church of God Seventh Day was formed as a separate corporation in November of 1930, with the purpose of coordinating the scattered small congregations from Portland to Eugene. The conference ordained Herbert Armstrong in the spring of 1931 and he began doing regular six week campaigns in the area, usually with a minister sent from Stanberry, Missouri. While Mr. Armstrong's efforts were blessed with fruit—new converts to the truth—the other men began to teach Pentecostalism and other ideas, often moving to undermine Mr. Armstrong.

It was the depths of the Great Depression, so the conference was unable to provide Mr. Armstrong a salary. For two years he got by doing advertising in Astoria while pastoring and teaching. Mrs. Bertha Dillon, Mr. Armstrong's sister-in-law, related to me in 1983 that the Armstrong's poverty was far worse during that time than is recorded in Mr. Armstrong's autobiography. She and her husband often took over food and firewood to Loma and the children.

Mr. Armstrong continued to preach on the Sabbath and give public lectures. In March of 1932 the Oregon Conference of The Church of God ordained Herbert Armstrong a second time, this time as a "minister, and apostle of the true primitive faith..."

In February of 1933, after three more years of poverty, learning and teaching, Mike Helms told Mr. Armstrong that the congregation in Jefferson had just enough donations to hire him as their pastor and asked him to serve. His salary was \$3 per week. The church secretary at the time, Emma Mitchell (now Yoder) laughed as she told me years later about writing those small checks, but said that was all the church could afford to pay.

The Armstrongs were living in a small house in Salem at the time, but an opportunity came up for him that summer to conduct public Bible lectures in the Eugene area at the Firbutte school house. The lectures led to a congregation of about 20 people despite continual undermining by two ministers who wanted to teach different ideas. In August of 1933 Mr. Armstrong decided to refuse his \$3 per week salary, move to Eugene and continue teaching God's truth to this small but growing congregation.

On Oct. 9, 1933 Mr. Armstrong spoke on the radio for the first time. It was a 15-minute program on KORE, a small 100-Watt station in Eugene. He spoke on the promises to Abraham. So many people contacted the station requesting a written copy of the program that the station manager offered Mr. Armstrong a regular Sunday morning program of 30 minutes for \$2.50 per week. Mr. Armstrong lacked the money, but trusted God to provide. On the first Sunday morning of 1934 the *World Tomorrow* broadcast went on the air in Eugene. The first issue of *The Plain Truth* was printed on Feb. 1, and the rest is history.

Today we are thankful that the United Church of God is blessed with stability, resources to do God's work and a faithful ministry. It is good to occasionally remember our humble beginnings and to thank our God that He has been Our Shepherd all along the journey. **UN**

Below: Scrael Hill Church, built by members of the Church of God Seventh Day in Jefferson in the 1940s. For many years they considered Mr. Armstrong their pastor and Ambassador College students occasionally gave sermons here in the 1950's and 60's. Today it has been turned into a residence.

