

A Brief History of Red Bird Mission

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About two years after hurricane Katrina, in 2005, I was drafted by my Church to go on a mission trip to render aid to those in southern Mississippi still recovering from Katrina. I found the experience very satisfying to say the least. A few months later Jim Wisby organized another mission opportunity, for those who were willing, to go to the Red Bird Mission Work Camp in Southeastern Kentucky. It was again a satisfying experience and one that has been repeated twice a year for the past fifteen years, with the exception of a two year hiatus due to Covid. I have developed a deep affection for Red Bird and the staff there as well as for the work we do on our trips there.

So tonight my presentation will be a brief History of the Red Bird Mission.

Tradition in the Robinson family has it that an Indian Chief, Red Bird, after whom the Red Bird River was named, was a Cherokee Indian. His native habitat was in what is now Western North Carolina. It is related that some 250 or more years ago in the days of the early settlement of the American continent, three brothers named Robinson came over from England and landed on the Atlantic coast near the present site of New York. One of the brothers settled and remained near that location. Another of the brothers pushed into the interior and was never again heard from and was believed to have been killed by the Indians. The third brother journeyed south into what is now the state of North Carolina and settled among the Cherokee Indians and where it is related he married an Indian woman and raised a family.

Tradition does not tell us the name of the Robinson brother who settled in Western North Carolina among the Cherokees. When his son, John Robinson, who was half Cherokee, was a young man, Chief Red Bird became dissatisfied with the hunting in the section where they lived and he and John Robinson, together with an Indian boy named Ladd, set out across the Smokey Mountains to find new and more satisfactory hunting grounds. They traveled into what is now the state of Tennessee and across the Cumberland River and over onto the waters of the Red Bird River. When they reached the Red Bird they found the hunting, particularly the turkey hunting, so satisfactory that Chief Red Bird decided they had found that which they had sought and it is related that they built a shelter along the river and from whence they would go forth on their hunting trips.

Later on white men began to come into Kentucky along the Boone Trail which later came to be known as the Wilderness Road. Some of these settlers pushed into Central Kentucky, while others stopped and settled along the trail. Still others after passing through the Cumberland Gap turned off in various directions and among these were Dillion Asher and John Gilbert. These, so far as we know, were the first white settlers to permanently settle on the Red Bird River. Dillion Asher settled south of what is known

as Paw Asher Branch and Preacher Johnny Gilbert settled at the mouth of Gilbert's Creek. Later, other settlers followed and in the course of time numerous families came to live in what is now Clay and Leslie Counties of Kentucky

When Chief Red Bird stopped to linger in this section and built his first bark shelter on the banks of Red Bird, the country was covered with magnificent forest. Stately white oak trees were abundant throughout the land; the coves and northern exposures were studded with towering poplar, curly walnut and curly maple were in sufficient abundance as to satisfy any gun maker's dream. Other species of timber were also abundant. This timber provided the early settlers with inexpensive and practical materials from which to build their homes and other structures, as well as serve for fencing and fuel. There now stands at the mouth of Paw Asher Branch, a house built by Dillion Asher more than 175 years ago. It serves as a monument to the enduring character of the old time log houses built on Red Bird River,

As an aside here I should interject that in the early 20th Century Henry Ford bought more than a million of acres of hardwood forest in southeastern Kentucky. Mr. Ford always wanted to control all aspects in the manufacturing of his early automobiles and since his early cars had wooden spokes on the wheels and wooden steering wheels his desire to control these wooden raw materials led to his purchase of these forested lands. Fast forward to the late 1930s and with the need of wood materials eliminated from cars and trucks Mr. Ford sold much of his acreage to the government for a nice profit. This acreage is today part of the Daniel Boone National Forest.

Red Bird Mission was founded in 1921 in the southeastern corner of Kentucky to provide education and Christian evangelic ministries to residents of the area. The Mission was started by the Evangelical Church on a small piece of property, at the confluence of Cow Fork and the Red Bird River.

The story of Red Bird is one of deep faith in God. Red Bird Mission was born in answer to prayer. It is a story of gracious outpouring of prayer and means by the church.

As early as 1913 the women of the Evangelical Church became aware of the needs of the people of the Southern Highlands. In 1919 the Illinois Branch Women's Missionary Society was the first of three branches to request that the church begin work here. After much prayer and study the Women's Board established the Faith Fund, named thus, as they said, "in the faith that money would flow into it and that God will show us where to invest it."

Meanwhile, God-fearing people in the mountains of Southeastern Kentucky were praying that someone would “come over and help us.” Miss Zelfhia Roberts, a Presbyterian girl from near Hyden, was one of those who prayed. She taught in a little school at Phillip’s Fork across the mountain from Beverly, Kentucky. Once a week she walked to Beverly for the mail. There she saw intelligent boys doing nothing and receiving no training. She also heard that Uncle Millard and Aunt Myrtle Knuckles, a local couple, wanted a school for the youth. So, as she crossed the mountain each week she regularly stopped at a certain rock to pray that a Christian school would be built at Red Bird. She said that God had assured her that her prayers offered at this wayside altar would be answered.

Aunt Carrie Knuckles also prayed that her children would have a chance to attend a school and Sunday School near their home. Years later, when her children did have this opportunity and later grew up into fine, useful citizens, she said, “I cannot express in words my appreciation for this school. Sometimes we can’t see our prayers answered for a long time, but we must never give up, for God is before us, leading us gently over.”

So it was that God answered these prayers and sent the Evangelical Church into the Cumberland Mountains of Kentucky into the area called Red Bird. The first workers, Miss Myra Bowman and Miss Emeline Welsh, arrived to teach elementary grades on July 1, 1921. Rev. J. J. DeWall was the first pastor appointed to the Mission and served as superintendent from 1921 until his death in 1928. Under his leadership a pattern was set that continues today. Led by the Holy Spirit, Rev. and Mrs. DeWall demonstrated the purpose of Red Bird – “to bring Jesus Christ into every heart and to bring life abundant to all.”

The first school building was completed at Beverly in January 1922. As the school grew, a nearby dormitory was established for boarding high school students. Rev. DeWall visited other communities to preach on a regular basis. These preaching points evolved in Jack’s Creek, Beech Fork, Greasy Creek, Mill Creek and Phillip’s Fork.

Since its early days Red Bird Mission has worked to meet the health care needs of the people in the Red Bird River Valley. Soon after teachers came, nurses and doctors arrived. Red Bird medical work began in 1922 with Miss Lydia Rice, RN as the first medical worker. Dr. Harlan Heim joined the staff in 1926. The first hospital was built at Beverly in 1928 but for many years, calls to mountain homes were made by medical staff on horseback. In 1959, a larger, modern hospital and outpatient clinic (1960) were constructed seven miles down Red Bird River in Clay County on property that had been obtained from Ford Motor Company in the 1940’s for food production for the Mission.

The educational, health and spiritual outreach through the churches and schools of Red Bird Mission prospered as its denomination grew through mergers. The Evangelical Church and the Church of the United Brethren in Christ merged in 1946 to become the Evangelical United Brethren. In 1968 the Evangelical United Brethren Church united with the Methodist Church to become the United Methodist Church. Local churches in the area were reorganized under the name of the Red Bird Missionary Conference in 1973. Red Bird Mission was recognized as an agency in the Red Bird Missionary Conference, and in 1975 Red Bird Hospital (later to be renamed Red Bird Mountain Medical Center) was incorporated separately and recognized as a separate agency.

The hospital operated until 1986 when in-patient services were discontinued for economic reasons. In 2000, Red Bird Mountain Medical Center was renamed Red Bird Clinic, Inc. to more correctly reflect its primary focus as an out-patient clinic. The activities of Red Bird Clinic, Inc., included a medical clinic, dental clinic and community nurse outreach until 2011 when the operation of the medical clinic was transferred to Memorial Hospital of Manchester. The medical clinic is now a satellite clinic of Memorial Hospital.

In 1981 the school and gymnasium on the Beverly Campus were destroyed by fire. For two years school was held in temporary facilities on the Queendale Campus in Clay County. The present school building was dedicated in 1983. The school continued to operate as a Settlement school until 1988 when it became a Christian school funded by Red Bird Mission with income-based tuition. Red Bird Christian School, grades K-12, is fully accredited by Christian Schools International, AdvancedEd, Kentucky Department of Education, and the General Board of Higher Education and Ministry of the United Methodist Church. A preschool program established in the early 1970's now serves 3- and 4-year old children at two different sites in Clay County.

The community outreach ministries to the elderly and families of these communities have grown to be a significant part of the overall ministries since the 1990's. The DeWall Senior Citizens Center started operations in 1991 and the Red Bird Elderly Housing apartments were opened in 1996. Emphasis on encouraging family food production led to the establishment of a farmers market in 2010 and a commercial food kitchen in 2017. A permanent pavilion for the farmers market was constructed in 2015 as part of a project to provide a potable water-dispensing kiosk for area residents without a clean drinking water source.

The clothing and thrift shop ministries increased in scope after moving into the enlarged facilities on Queendale Center in 2000-2001. The craft marketing program has grown in recent years through in-church craft fairs as well as consignment and online sales.

The Work Camp program that enlisted volunteers to maintain mission facilities decades ago now involves approximately 2500 participants annually expanded its purpose to include community home repair and improvement in 1984. The first new home was built in 2016 in the community by volunteers.

It is the Work Camp where our crew from First United Methodist Church goes each March and November. Our tasks are divided between working on Camp facilities and working on local homes. The pay is for our labors is mighty poor but rewards are great!