

NECROLOGY

VIRGIL BERRY, M.D.

1866—1954

Virgil Berry was born near Salem, Washington County, Indiana, March 14, 1866; died March 10, 1954 at Okmulgee, Oklahoma. He was educated in the public schools, and at Moore's Academy, in Kentucky, and was graduated in medicine at what is now known as Saint Louis University, St. Louis, Missouri, in 1895.

Leaving his adopted home in Springfield, Missouri, in 1889, he spent the winter in taking medical and surgical lectures in Chicago. In the spring of 1890, he arrived at Wagoner, Indian Territory, a stranger with less than five dollars, to enter the practice of medicine. By coincidence, on the day of his arrival in Wagoner there also arrived from Tennessee, William Robert James and his family, to visit a brother living eighteen miles east of Wagoner. By further coincidence, next day Dr. Berry was called to visit the sick wife of the brother of William Robert James, making the thirty six miles round trip horseback. This first professional call of his career he met Emma Kate James, daughter of William Robert, who was later to become his wife.

Next day, having decided that Wagoner was too small to support a physician, he went eighteen miles north to Chouteau, where he associated himself with an old physician, Dr. Burr, who had practiced there for many years. At the end of the summer's work Dr. Berry returned to Chicago for the winter course of medical lectures. In the spring of 1891, he returned to Wagoner and here practiced medicine for many years, only leaving to receive his degree in St. Louis.

Later, he was appointed National Physician for the Seminole Nation by Governor John F. Brown, the noted Seminole chief, and lived in Wewoka.

When the Red River division of the Frisco railroad was built from Sapulpa, Indian Territory, to Dennison, Texas, he purchased lots in a cornfield at what is now known as the town of Wetumka, Oklahoma. He built the first business house in the new town, and established the Wetumka Drug Company, which he owned for several years. The drug store was open for business before the railroad reached the town. He also built the first home of modern design in Wetumka, and established the first telephone system there.

Dr. Berry moved to Okmulgee in 1909, where he entered into a large practice, for he had become known as a leading surgeon in this part of the state. His practice often called him to Holdenville, Wewoka, Okemah, Mounds, Beggs and Muskogee and many other places. He established the first hospital in Okmulgee at 515 South Muskogee Street. Mrs. E. H. Moore, late wife of the late Senator E. H. Moore, and Fred Storm, comprised the hospital board.

In 1912, Dr. Berry was elected from the third ward of the city of Okmulgee as one of the Board of Freeholders for the writing of the present City Charter of Okmulgee.

He was the last President of the Indian Territory Medical Association, and presided at the meeting in Oklahoma City in May, 1906 that accomplished merger before statehood, of the Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory Associations. At that meeting he was elected by the new state association as delegate to the American Medical Association Convention in Chicago.

In 1917, he was elected to Fellowship in the American College of Surgeons. At that time the Mayo surgeons were on the board.

Dr. Berry served for about thirty years as surgeon for the Frisco Railroad.

During World War I, Dr. Berry was commissioned Captain in the U. S. Medical Corps and served to the end of the war on the surgical staff of the Base Hospital at Camp Beauregard, Louisiana.

President Grover Cleveland appointed Dr. Berry a member of the U. S. Pension Board for Indian Territory under the old law which allowed jurisdiction in pension cases to State and Territorial boards.

He was also a delegate to the first meeting ever held in Indian Territory to organize the Democratic party. This meeting was held about 1893 in Muskogee.

Virgil and Emma Kate James Berry had four children, the eldest, Karl Palmer, died in 1910. Those living are Homer Mulhall Berry, Fort Worth, Texas; Mrs. Thomas H. Stewart, Hargill, Texas; and Mrs. Wilson Denton Hand, Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

After retirement, Dr. Berry wrote a Sunday column for his hometown paper, *The Okmulgee Daily Times*. This column was widely read for its colorful pioneer reminiscences, its clear political analysis and pungent remarks on the passing scene, both local and national. He never received remuneration for his writings, preferring to retain ownership, and independence to express himself freely. In 1952, fellow citizens voted Dr. Virgil Berry one of its most useful citizens through the medium of the written word.

—Margaret Berry Hand.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

JOHN HENRY BYERS

1872—1953

The great-grandfather of John Henry Byers was a missionary Baptist preacher in North Carolina. His father and mother were Joseph P. Byers and Carry C. Turner Byers who came from Alabama. John Byers, the second of ten children was born near Enterprise, Arkansas, on September 27, 1872. He spent one year in study at Buckner College, Witcherville, Arkansas, and later studied at Ouchita College at Arkadelphia, Arkansas. He was saved at the age of sixteen, and joined the Baptist Church. He had gone forward for prayer several times, but had received no relief. When he concluded that he could not be saved, "It was then that something happened" and he made a perfect surrender. Byers told that "a powerful urge would rise up within me to preach but I knew that I could not do it. One day mother said to me, 'All your life I've prayed for the hour that you would preach, God will help you'. That night I tried to preach, but did mighty poorly."

His first pastorates were in the Baptist churches of Shady Grove, two miles west of Waldron; and in Unity Church at Brawley, both in Scott County, Arkansas. He organized the Baptist Church at Parks, Arkansas, and the churches at Hartford, Midland, and Perryville, Arkansas. He was associational missionary three years and state missionary for two years in Arkansas. He was a member of the State Convention Board for several years and moderator of Buckner Association for over twenty years.

His first church attendance in Indian Territory was at an Indian Church, Folsom's Chapel. "As some of the Folsom family [Choctaw descent] were Baptists and some Methodists, ministers of both denominations as well as Presbyterians preached there."¹ The Baptist Church at Folsom's Chapel was disbanded about 1880 and re-organized by Reverend E. B. Harlan in 1885. The church is now known as the Macedonia Church, Pocola, Oklahoma.

One of the Folsom's gave John Byer's father "two fine leases of land" near what is now Cowlington. In the summer of 1874 Joseph Byers built a log house, a shelter for mules, cleared some land, making thousands of rails from the timber. January brought a heavy snow which caused the family to return home to Arkansas. When they came back a few weeks later to their lease, they found that hostile Indians had turned all of their labors into ashes—"home, barn and rails were all burned." The Choctaws bitterly opposed the cutting down of their forests by the encroaching whites. Byers told an Indian, "I was given the land by an Indian, but if I have to fight to keep it, I'll go back to Arkansas." In 1876, several families, took up leases in the vicinity of Byer's lease, among whom were Coke and Fowler (A. F.) Cowling. When they offered to buy the leases from Joseph Byers he replied, "No, you are welcome to them as I have given up all thought of moving to Indian Territory." The Cowlings took the land and later led in the organizing of the Cowlington Baptist Church.² On October 24, 1884 this church helped in the organization of the Short Mountain Baptist Association.

John Byers served his first pastorate in Indian Territory at Liberty Hill, four miles northeast of Cameron. He also served at different times the First Church at Poteau, and the churches at Stigler, Cameron, Gilmore, Shady Point, Panama, Wister, Talihina, Albion, and Monroe. He helped build church houses at Poteau, Cameron, and Monroe. Many years later (1927), he served as missionary in the LeFlore-Latimer Association.

Of the 1897 session of the Baptist General Association of Western Arkansas and Indian Territory that met with the Salt Creek Church, two miles east of Calvin, Indian Territory, he said, "The men camped in the tabernacle and the women in the church house. A fine spring furnished water. Negro brethren were hired to prepare the meals. Fat beeves and hogs were killed; chicken and vegetables were served in abundance. It was a privilege to preach in this meeting not only to whites but also to Choctaws, Chickasaws, Seminoles, and Creeks".

Brother Byers returned to Waldron, Arkansas in mid-September 1897 to find that his wife was sick; a month later, it proved that she had typhoid. Either Doctor Ike Leeming or Doctor C. Bevil came to their home every day for the fifty-two days, attending her. Both doctors advising that it would be a full year before she could do house work. Brother Byers wrote of this time of trouble: "I was dead broke so we moved to my father-in-law's at Mansfield. Then my little daughter was stricken down first with whooping cough, then typhoid fever. She passed away on January 13, 1898. I bought the little casket on credit! Brother Lawrence W. Wright had reported our state to Miss Annie W. Armstrong.³ Then I received a letter from the Baptist Church at LaGrange, Missouri, telling me that

¹ Quotations are taken from an interview with Brother Byers on Oct. 27, 1952 or from his own autobiography.

² Short Mountain Baptist Association Minutes page 1, 1884.

³ Annie W. Armstrong was a devoted steward of her worldly possessions. Out of her own resources she probably gave more money than any other Baptist of her day to furthering of the gospel in the southwest. Her generosity became legendary among the Baptist pioneers of gospel missions on the frontier.

their church would soon send my family a box of clothing. Also in that letter was a money order from their B.Y.P.U. (Baptist Young Peoples' Union) with a fraction over \$8, just to a cent what I paid out for the little girl's casket."

In late January 1898 he was off again in his Master's service. He took a train to Shawnee, which was only "a shack town of the wild west type. The chief business of the town was liquor, gambling and licentiousness." He wrote that the "Kickapoo Indians wrapped in blankets with long hair went in droves." Visiting the pastor of the Shawnee Baptist Church he found "a likeable brother. The church was a small, one room structure with an attendance of only women and children".

The next day he went on to Keokuk Falls where he was to hold an evangelistic meeting. "I stayed in the home of a saloon keeper who was drunk most of the time. His wife was a Christian. All of the saloon keepers admitted to me that their business was immoral, but that there was good money in it. Several times while preaching, my sermon was interrupted and I was called a liar, but I did not answer them."

John Byers not only did a monumental piece of missionary work but also made a notable contribution in the preservation of Baptist Church history. Through the years he had saved scores of associational *Minutes*.

About two weeks before his death, he was taken to Sparks Hospital in Fort Smith, where on February 25, 1953, he went on to be with the One whom he had faithfully served. He was buried at Mansfield, Arkansas, with the Reverend Columbus Lee Barnes, his pastor, the Reverend Karl McClendon, and the Reverends Murle Walker and Herman Highfill participating in the funeral service attended by a great throng. At the writer's urging, a short time before he died, Brother Byers wrote an autobiographical sketch. In it he wrote hopefully about his death only two months away. He chose the speakers for his funeral service, and insisted that he "be buried in a cheap casket, no eulogies and no flowers." He felt that all the eulogy should go to his Christ. It was all so characteristic of John Byers. His further instructions were that the congregation should sing "Amazing Grace", "Rock of Ages", "How Firm a Foundation" and "There is a Fountain Filled With Blood."

The greatest thing about John Henry Byers was not the great suffering that he endured patiently, or the dangers that he faced boldly, or even the monumental work that he did. The greatest thing about him was his spirit: a spirit that was both courageous and sweet. It was his attitude, his great spirit of magnanimity that has forever set him apart among the great.

—Herbert Miner Pierce.

Wilburton, Oklahoma