

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

■ December 2005

O Come, Let Us Adore Him!

The Rev. Vern Jones

My earliest memory is Christmas in church. When I was not yet three years old, my parents took me with my two older sisters and two older brothers to the Midnight Mass at our parish Church of St. Matthew's in Enid, Oklahoma. I can vividly remember the wonder of that night. Our church was filled with the scent of the cedar roping around the windows and the faint odor of the altar candles. The beautiful Christmas carols gave me a wonderful, warm feeling. But being such a little boy, I soon grew very sleepy.

I remember my mother laying me down on the seat of the pew behind them as they knelt for the liturgy. And as I lay there, I looked up to the pinnacle of the roof, and I thought it was surely the highest thing I'd ever seen in my young life. It felt so good to be there.

I'm so glad that is the oldest memory in my life. Because St. Matthew's has always been for me my "spiritual womb." On August 2, 1927, one month after my birth, I was baptized there, confirmed twelve years later, and then ordained a deacon at twenty-four in this sacred place where my soul was knit to our Lord.

When he was six years old, my father arrived in Indian Territory in 1894 with his parents, who drove two covered wagons three weeks from Nebraska where my Welsh grandparents had first homesteaded. They settled in the western part of Indian Territory to stake out their 160 acres, and three years later, it legally became their home. Some of you may remember the article I wrote for *The Vintage Voice* two years ago, telling of my father growing up at the nearby Cheyenne "Whirlwind Mission" where Deacon David Pendleton Oakerhater was the pastor. He is remembered on our Episcopal liturgical calendar every September first. This was the root of our faith in the life of the Episcopal Church.

In 1917, my father, Casey Jones, who had become a conductor for the Frisco Railroad, married. Six years later, his twenty-seven year old wife died in her sleep, leaving him with four children: an older son not yet five, twin two-year-old daughters and a baby boy who was nearly one. A year later, he met my mother, Agnes Reynolds, at the Harvey House in Snyder, Oklahoma. Fred Harvey had established dining restaurants at major railroad terminals before the days of dining cars, and the trains would stop there for the passengers' meals. They were served by young girls who had been trained at a special school in Springfield, Missouri, and commissioned as "Harvey Girls." They wore special uniforms and lived in a dormitory above the train station supervised by a matron. It was considered a special honor to be a Harvey Girl, quite like the airline stewardesses many decades later.

After her graduation from the Fred Harvey school, my mother was sent to Oklahoma. And it was there in 1922 that she met my father. They were married a year later, on January 15, 1923, at St. John's Church in Wichita, Kansas.

Mom became “mother” for Dad’s four children. They bought a home in Enid for \$2,500(!), and three years later, I was born at home there on July 19, 1927.

The church was the center of our lives. For thirty-eight years my father, who had a wonderful talent for carpentry, plumbing and electrical work, served as Junior Warden of our parish. Our rector would phone with a problem and Dad would be there to solve it. I imagine the church in those years had a very small budget for repairs!

Mother was a member of the Altar Guild and active in the Women’s Auxiliary (as it was then called). We children attended Church School, sang in the junior choir as we grew into it, and the boys became Altar Boys (sadly closed to girls in those years). When I was twelve, I began to play the organ for the Church School service and later became the parish organist and choirmaster.

Every Sunday, the seven Joneses filled a pew in church, unless we were in the choir or serving at the altar. That small congregation bonded into a loving Family of Christ.

The Depression years were tough for everyone. Children’s outgrown clothing was passed along, and, in season, produce from the gardens and orchards was shared. Parish dinners were fixed from scratch—no frozen food or quick mixes in those days. Wooden saw horses held the long planks that served as tables. The ladies would spend hours ironing long white linen tablecloths which, with the addition of candles and garden flowers in season or ivy from the side of the church, transformed the old stucco parish house into a splendid banquet hall.

Our parish youth group met every Sunday at 6 p.m. for Evening Prayer, followed by our sack suppers, a study or program, and then dancing. Someone gave us an old Victrola. We had just one record, “Who Wouldn’t Love You?” which we played over and over. Betty Vance Smith, David Hume and I would sometimes be the only youth to come. So Dave and I took turns dancing with Betty. Years later, Dave and Betty were married, leaving me to become a life-long bachelor.

The church was the center of our lives. I can never remember a time that I didn’t look forward to Sundays at church. I confess that I have had a life-long passionate love affair with the Episcopal Church that along with my family has been my life’s greatest blessing. I was sixteen when I told my parents and rector that I was called to be a priest. This December 17, I’ll celebrate my fifty-third anniversary as a priest.

On Christmas Eve, I’ll attend our magnificent Grace Cathedral in San Francisco for the glorious Midnight Mass. I’ll sing the beloved carols, and, as always, there will be a lump in my throat as I cherish happy memories of my seventy-nine years of Christmas. But I shall especially remember being with my parents and siblings at that beautiful little Church of St. Matthew’s in Enid, Oklahoma. And I shall be that two-year-old little boy filled with indescribable wonder at the glory of Christmas as we celebrate the wonderful mystery of the Birth of our Blessed Lord Jesus. “O Come, Let Us Adore Him!”



During his thirteen years of retirement, Vern Jones has served as supply priest for thirty-eight churches in five dioceses and continues in his twenty-ninth year as a weekly volunteer chaplain at a mental hospital and in his seventh year as priest for a Mandarin Chinese congregation. Currently, he is serving as acting Canterbury Chaplain at Stanford University. He has served as Chaplain to the Retired clergy, spouses and surviving spouses for the Diocese of California for the past twelve years.

