

The Vintage Voice

Serving The Church Pension Fund's Family of Beneficiaries

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“O Lord, You Are My Portion And My Cup . . . Indeed, I Have A Goodly Heritage!” (Psalm 16:5,6)

The Rev. Vern E. Jones

In 1985, at our General Convention in Anaheim, the church approved the addition of David Pendleton Oakerhater to our liturgical calendar on September 1. This was the first time a Native American had been given a special recognition in our commemoration of the saints of the church. Because of this remarkable deacon of Christ, I found my vocation as priest, a vocation that has lasted for nearly fifty-one years.

Oakerhater, a Cheyenne, was born in Indian Territory, now the state of Oklahoma, in 1847. The Cheyenne were buffalo hunters, not warriors as many presume. In 1875, Oakerhater was captured along with twenty-six others involved in an uprising after many years of broken treaties and promises, and sent in chains to the military prison at Ft. Marion in St. Augustine, Florida. There, under the supervision of Captain Richard H. Pratt, the captives grieved their separation from family and tribe.

Captain Pratt noted that they often drew pictures in the soil depicting buffalo hunting scenes, so he provided them art supplies. Many of their original drawings can be found today in the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D.C. Captain Pratt arranged English tutoring for the prisoners. Eventually, they came to know the Bible and our Lord and His family, the church.

Oakerhater and three of the others declared their calling to take Christ to their people. And so, in 1878, they were sent to upstate New York, where they were tutored in the home of the Rev. and Mrs. John B. Wicks in Paris, New York. The expenses for Oakerhater were provided by Mrs. George H. Pendleton, whose husband later became a U.S. Senator. She had known Oakerhater from her winter visits in Florida, where she had purchased some of his art and where he taught her daughters archery. On October 6, 1878, Oakerhater was baptized and took as his baptismal name David Pendleton Oakerhater, in thanksgiving for his benefactor. Three years later, on June 7, 1881, he was ordained a deacon. He was immediately sent back to Indian Territory as a missionary to the Cheyenne.

In 1897, the government established a day school near the small town of Fay on land given by the Cheyenne Chief Whirlwind. It was named “Whirlwind Mission” to recognize the chief’s efforts as a peacemaker. Four years later, the government ended its sponsorship of the school but permitted the Episcopal Church to continue to operate it as a church school under the direction of Oakerhater.

The Whirlwind Mission was closed in 1917, and Deacon Oakerhater, with others, moved to the nearby town of Watonga, where he continued to pastor them until his death on August 31, 1931. The congregation was literally abandoned by the larger church for the next thirty years.

In April of 1894, my Welsh paternal grandparents, along with my father, Cary Jones (who was six at the time), arrived to homestead near Fay, after a three-week journey by covered wagon from their previous homestead in Nebraska. Three years later, the Whirlwind Mission was established not far from their new home, and this became their spiritual home.

After the mission closed in 1917, my father continued to visit Oakerhater in Watonga several times a year. He always said to me, “He was my mentor as well as my pastor.” I have never forgotten that, on my ordination day as a priest in 1952, my father said to me, “If I had had the opportunity for education, I would have become a priest.”

In January of 1961, my beloved father died. Five months later, I received a letter from my Bishop, Chilton Powell (not having knowledge of my family’s relationship to the original Whirlwind Mission), asking me to visit a Cheyenne lady, Winona Goodbear, at her home in Watonga, some seventy-five miles from Woodward. This had been my base for twenty years as the bishop’s circuit rider for four missions on the western plains. Winona had written to the bishop that she had grown up at the old Whirlwind Mission and was now elderly, in poor health, and did not want to die without receiving Holy Communion.

I drove to Watonga the following Thursday and visited Winona in her home. In the course of our visit, I told her of my father’s relationship to the mission. She smiled and said, “I knew him well. I used to ride in his wagon when he brought us the mail each week.” I offered to return the following Thursday evening for a house Eucharist in her home, and suggested she might invite some of the others. The following Thursday night, twelve of the original Whirlwind Mission members came, the men with their long braids, the women wearing blankets across their shoulders, and we had our first Eucharist together. I was amazed how well they still knew the liturgy. The next day I phoned the bishop, and he said, “Stay with it. We’ve been guilty of neglect for far too long.”

I served the renewed Whirlwind Mission for eight years — years I shall always treasure. We had no property, we met every Thursday evening for Eucharist in someone’s home, and later, as we grew in numbers, we met in borrowed churches, and for a time, in the rotunda of the city hall. I established a two-week summer vacation school for the children. My mother cooked three meals a day for staff and helped with the school. Each evening the adults joined us for films, hymn sings or studies, and on the last night, for a great Eucharist.

These were eight memorable years for me, for we had become a true family in Christ. They even gave me a Cheyenne name that meant, “The Above Man.” When I finally left them, they presented my mother and me with a most important gift, our “burial moccasins,” to be carried to “the Happy Hunting Grounds” so we would have new shoes for our new life.

I never cease to marvel at the wondrous ways God touches our lives. I had been serving them for a few months when I went to visit my mother. She said to me, “When you were young and the bishop came each year for confirmations, your father would always have a private visit with him to plead with him to send a priest to the Indians at Watonga.” Thirty years after David Pendleton Oakerhater’s death and five months after my father’s death, Dad’s prayers were answered when his son was the priest who was sent!

I rejoice in my heritage as a member of the Episcopal Church, which I have loved all my life as my family in Christ. And I thank our Lord for the roots of that membership in His family because of the ministry of God’s faithful deacon, David Pendleton Oakerhater. Indeed, “I have a goodly heritage!”



The Rev. Vern Jones of Redwood City, California has been retired for 11 years, during which time he has served as supply priest for 37 different parishes. His hobbies are travel; he visited his 50th country last year with a tour of China. An avid gardener, he recently received the award for “Redwood City’s most beautiful garden of the year.”