

# “Sir Great Heart” of Texas Baptists

BY KAREN O'DELL BULLOCK | *B.H. Carroll Theological Institute*

The wagon creaked slowly, trundling its way through an East Texas pine forest in the summer of 1859. Overhead, the towering trees swayed in the light breeze and provided dappling shade from the oppressive sun. The 26-year-old Tennessee-born pastor, Robert Cooke Buckner, did not mind the heat. He and his soul-mate wife, Vienna, and their two little girls were headed west in search of a drier, healthier climate with all the family's worldly possessions and hopes packed in that small wagon.

Settling in Paris, Robert regained his strength and became pastor of the Baptist church there. His reputation for evangelistic fervor, church planting, a missionary spirit, organizing Sunday schools and erecting church buildings throughout North Texas grew quickly. He demonstrated such leadership gifts Baptists in the state invited him to shoulder conventionwide responsibilities, which he did with deep joy and commitment the next 60 years.

Given the name “Sir Great Heart” by Texas Baptists, Robert Cooke Buckner (1833-1919) was a remarkable man among many outstanding statesmen of his era. As a pastor, philanthropist, denominationalist, newspaper editor, businessman, social reformer and “father” to thousands of orphans, Buckner's work stands apart from the rest in both volume and kind. What Buckner so uniquely pioneered in Baptist life was the practice of organized social reform.

The work of Buckner on behalf of children is perhaps his best-known contribution. Buckner Orphans' Home now is the 134-year-old nonprofit agency Buckner International. Under his direction, however, Texas Baptists also came to support child welfare, improved prison conditions, better race relationships, innovations in education—including women's theological education, homes for the elderly, a Texas Baptist hospital system, restoration programs for former prostitutes and humane societies for animal cruelty-prevention. In fact, Buckner initiated 10 categories of social reform in which Texas Baptists became actively engaged.

Buckner served as president of the Baptist General Convention of Texas 20 consecutive years, becoming a respected national voice for the wounded and powerless. That led to significant assignments, including a White House appointment to the Conference on Children and elected positions with the National Conference on Corrections and Charities.

His legacy today among Texas Baptists is immeasurable. Grounded in Scripture and building bridges of respect across sectarian and denominational lines, the reconciling work of ministering “to the least of these” is holistic and transformational. “Sir Great Heart” showed Texas Baptists how to make an impact on society—with hearts, hands and minds intentionally trained to apply the whole gospel to the whole world.