

Texas' First Sunday School, 1829

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A twenty-four year old New York school teacher, Baptist Thomas J. Pilgrim, seeking a healthier, milder climate, arrived at San Felipe, the capital of Stephen F. Austin's colony, in January of 1829. Presently, Pilgrim resolved "to found a Sunday School" which he began the next month with "thirty[-]two scholars." This first Texas Sunday School was of a union nature, representing different denominations. The American Sunday School Union apparently furnished it literature since scarcely any sectarian lessons were produced until well after the Civil War.

Pilgrim, forty-five years later, described his Sunday School in detail:

Now let us for a moment contemplate this little Sunday-school. In a black-jack and post oak grove near the center of town is rude log cabin about eighteen by twenty-two feet, the roof covered with boards held down by weight-poles, the logs unhewn, and the cracks neither chinked or battened, a dirt floor, and across it are placed several logs hewn on one side for seats. At one end stands the superintendent, a mere stripling, and before him are about half a dozen gentlemen and ladies as teachers, and thirty-two children, without any of those appendages which are now considered necessary to a well conducted Sunday-School.

Pilgrim evidently taught his Sunday School "for both old and young," according to the Bible, and "free from any denominational leanings," so the Catholics gave him no trouble. Many people attended, several coming as far as ten miles. Lectures were held regularly until a few Mexicans lost a lawsuit against some colonists. Subsequently, Empresario Austin temporarily discontinued the services since the Mexicans knew they violated the colonization law.

However, in January 1830, Pilgrim left San Felipe and opened a school at McNeil's and Westall's settlement in Gulph Prairie, Brazoria County. After additional residences, he settled in Gonzales in 1843 where he helped organize the First Baptist Church in 1847, serving as church clerk and deacon for many years. He was active in the important Baptist Sunday School and Colportage Convention, participated in other religious and secular endeavors, and continued advancing the cause of interdenominational Bible teaching until his death in 1877.



Pilgrim's obituary paid him homage: "The father of Sunday Schools in Texas was followed to his grave not only by the old, but by the vast numbers of the children he had loved so dearly and for whom he had labored so long."

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