

## June 2023 – Volume 15, Number 6

*LEGACY, as the monthly newsletter of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, has as its mission to highlight the legacy forged by the people and events in Florida Baptist history. During 2023, the LEGACY's monthly issues will feature brief personal profiles of selected Florida Baptist men and women, who through their Christian commitment, have demonstrated Legacy Leadership in their ministry service on the Florida Baptist mission field. These persons, could join with the Apostle Paul, in declaring as "God's fellow workers" they have "laid a foundation" for God's kingdom on earth and upon which "someone else is building" [II Corinthians 3:9-10NIV].*

### **Native Floridian Homer Grice Developed S.B.C.'s Vacation Bible School**

The summer months in Florida Southern Baptist churches brings the opportunity to resume their annual ministry outreach through the vacation Bible school (V.B.S.) program. But few Baptists may be aware that a **Florida native – Homer L. Grice of Citra – was the initiator and developer of Southern Baptists' vacation Bible school program.** The program was assigned by the Southern Baptist Convention to the Sunday School Board's Sunday school department ministry.

When Grice, at age 41, was selected to lead the then-called "Daily Vacation Bible School" (D.V.V.S.) program he was serving as pastor of the First Baptist Church, Washington, Georgia, where he had been since 1915. Having a heart for the evangelization of unchurched children, Grice decided to conduct a summer version of Sunday school, except it was held every weekday morning for several weeks. "In his own church in Washington, Georgia, Grice found that the vacation Bible school could be a key part of outreach and evangelism efforts," feature writer Frank White reported.

### **Meeting the Spiritual Needs of Street Children**

Although Grice is credited with developing the D.V.B.S. program ministry for Southern Baptist churches, he did not originate the concept. In fact, when he started the "Daily Vacation Bible School" in rural Georgia, he was adapting a ministry concept that had begun modestly in 1898 in New York City and that became more widely promoted after the beginning of the twentieth century.

**"The first vacation Bible school called the 'Everyday Bible school,' like the first Sunday school, was an effort to care for the spiritual needs of neglected children.** They were mostly immigrant children, playing in the streets during the summer days, on New York City's East Side." wrote Homer Grice, who collected original documentation and chronicled the movement's early history. A woman named Mrs. Walker Aylett Hawes, and a member of New York City's Epiphany Baptist Church, had a passion to minister to those unsupervised children on the streets.



### Homer Grice's Pioneering Efforts

Homer Grice was the pioneer in developing and modeling the summer ministry for Southern Baptist churches. "Homer Grice was a young pastor in Georgia and was struck by the growing V.B.S. trend. His church, First Baptist Church of Washington, Georgia, built a new education building in 1921. Grice and his wife Ethel wanted to see the space used. So, they decided to embark on a V.B.S. journey of their own, holding their first school in the summer of 1922." Grice said in a years later interview that the idea to conduct a Baptist version of the summer ministry was based upon two factors. First, was the construction of a new building with available space. And, secondly, he recalled having read about the growing ministry in several national religious publications.

He held schools in the summer of 1922, 1923, and 1924. Grice described the need during the summer months, "the children were loose. . . running all over town. . . [with] no organizations to direct them. . . nowhere to go and nothing to do." Grice concluded, to turn the children's idleness into something positive could be achieved by conducting a vacation Bible school.

### Developing Southern Baptists' Newest Ministry

When Grice began his work at the Baptist Sunday School Board in the fall of 1924, he had to start "with a blank slate." As one later co-worker explained, "There was no organization, no literature, no advisers, no curriculum committee, no prepared writers in the field," among other things.

Almost immediately Grice determined that the D.V.B.S. ministry "could not be promoted without adequate literature and materials for the [local church] workers." As a result, Grice set about to create a guidebook and a series of thirteen teacher books for the workers assigned to the various target age (5 to 17 years old) groups – Beginner, Primary, Junior and Intermediate. "He decided that the books should be simple and untechnically written, with detailed guidance, so that inexperienced workers anywhere could take the books and put on a good school."

Additionally, **Grice defined a course of study for his writers to follow, established the plan of operation, formulated methods of procedure, devised means for training church and denominational leadership and developed a program of promotion.**

At the nexus of Grice's program concept was to **give "children a daily program to minister to physical, mental, moral, and spiritual needs.** He incorporated a patriotic regimen with the still-familiar opening exercises of pledges to the United States flag, the Christian flag, and the Bible." **Interestingly, "Grice wrote the pledge to the Bible that is still used today" in vacation Bible schools.**

Between 1925 and 1928, "the first series of lessons had been completed," and "no less than one half of the program contents of the twelve books had been written" by Grice. The other two key writers were Miss Mattie C. Leatherwood and Grice's spouse Ethel H. Grice, an educator in her own right. In a story about his calling, **Grice said, "the Holy Spirit had inspired" him with a vision for D.V.B.S. reaching multitudes.** In order to accomplish that, the "curriculum must be usable by the most inexperienced teacher," he stressed.

### Pacesetter Florida Baptist Churches

Several Florida Baptist churches were among the early adopters and pacesetters by embracing the D.V.B.S. ministry. As an example, Grice reported, "Southern Baptists had about 400 Daily Vacation Bible schools in 1926, the second year of the Sunday School Board's promotion of these schools." The report noted that among those schools, "Twelve schools reported an enrolment of more than 300." Included among those pacesetters and their enrolment were: First Church, Ft. Lauderdale, 435; First Church, Tampa, 364; and First Church, Orlando, 339.

Even now, in the twenty-first century, “vacation Bible school continues to follow the learning by doing teaching philosophy which involves pupils in activities relating to and emphasizing biblical truth. Biblical content is interpreted through the use of music, recreation, worship, drama, mission study” among other activities, observed Arthur Burcham in a history on V.B.S.

### Grice’s Early Years

Before he was called to serve with the Baptist Sunday School Board in 1924, Grice spent the first 41 years of his life preparing for his future ministry.

Homer Lamar Grice (b. 1883; d. 1974) was the first born of Albert G. Grice (b. 1850) and Sarah Lee Bennett Grice (b. 1864) while the couple briefly lived in Marion (FL) County’s rural community of Citra. Grice, senior, was a mechanic who soon moved his wife and newborn to Edwardsville, Alabama. Between 1885 and 1899 the Grices added five sons and three daughters, while living in Alabama’s Cleburne County’s small town of Edwardsville.

**The young Homer Grice at age 13, made a profession of faith and was baptized in the Baptist Church at Edwardsville.** He attended the Cleburne Institute which covered the equivalent of high school plus an additional two years of specialized training, from which he graduated in 1901. Concurrent with the last two years of his studies, Grice served as a school teacher in a rural Alabama public school. He then entered Mercer University in Macon, Georgia, from which he received a bachelor degree in 1912. Grice surrendered to the call of God to enter the pastoral ministry and was licensed to preach. During his junior and senior years at Mercer, Grice served as a parttime pastor of the Hatley (Georgia) Baptist Church.

One assessment of Homer Grice’s ministry service, was once described as a “whole personality” that he “placed into the [V.B.S.] movement and has been spent for its advancement,” wrote Jerome Williams of the Baptist Sunday School Board. **“He has thought, prayed, planned, read, dreamed, written, talked, preached, and promoted Vacation Bible School work. There is power in a consecrated personality.”**

[RESOURCES: Penny Baumgardner, “Floridian Homer L. Grice Developed Vacation Bible School for Southern Baptists,” *Journal of Florida Baptist Heritage*, Vol. 24, 2022; Landry Holmes, *It’s Worth It*, (Nashville, TN: LifeWay Christian Resources, 2018); Frank White, “Vacation Bible School, Founder’s Dream Comes True,” *The Baptist Program*, 1991; Arthur Burcham, “Vacation Bible School,” *Encyclopedia of Southern Baptists, Vol. III*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1971); Homer L. Grice interview by W. L. Howse, 1971; transcript from the Homer Grice Papers [AR. 795-576], held by the Southern Baptist Historical Archives and Library, Nashville, Tennessee; Jerome G. Williams, “Dr. Grice’s Contribution as Editor,” *The Sunday School Builder*, June, 1951; Southern Baptist Convention *Annual*, 1927; biographical files of the Florida Baptist Historical Society, Graceville, Florida.]

**Jefferson County Resident Receives  
2023 Baptist Heritage Award**



**Linda Gramling (Mrs. Herbert) Demott of the community of Elizabeth in Jefferson County, Florida, was presented the 2023 Baptist Heritage Award for “her visionary and yeoman efforts to preserve record and publish the history of the Elizabeth Baptist Church, Monticello, Florida,” according to the Florida Baptist Historical Society.**

The presentation of the award was made Sunday, May 21, 2023, at the Elizabeth Baptist Church, on the occasion of the 192-year anniversary of the congregation. Making the presentation was Donald S. Hepburn, managing director of the Society. He noted the selection was made by the six-member Board of Directors, Florida Baptist Historical Society, an entity of the Florida Baptist Convention, Inc.

Mrs. Demott, age 84 this year, is a lifelong member of the Elizabeth Baptist Church, Monticello, who has worked diligently since the early 1990s to collect, organize and develop material for a history book on the church that was established in 1831. Mrs. Demott made it a goal to write and publish a church history book, making it the first narrative of its type for the congregation. Publication of the book is set to occur in June.

In 2022 a special project Mrs. Demott undertook was the planned creation of a bronze plaque containing a replica of the church’s original constitution handwritten in nineteenth century English alongside a contemporary language translation. She single-handedly raised the necessary funds to have the bronze display produced by a third-party vendor. The plaque was dedicated by the church members during the May 21 morning worship service.

As the Elizabeth Baptist Church-designated historian since the 1950s, Mrs. Demott has prepared church anniversary observance material each year including the development of skits to “bring to life” the church’s historical leaders and events. Additionally, to promote the church’s history and to educate current members, Mrs. Demott enlisted other volunteers to establish a designated history display of early information and memorabilia about the Elizabeth Baptist Church. This task required the identification and collection of material for preservation.

In her committed volunteer service to the church, Mrs. Demott, since 1955 also has served as the volunteer music leader and pianist. Her high level of interest in music resulted in her being enlisted year-after-year as the associational music director for the Middle Florida Baptist Association. Additionally, for many years she was enlisted by the Church Music Department, Florida Baptist Convention, to serve as a leader of specialty conferences designed for the small church music leaders. For 25 years Mrs. Demott taught piano at the Aucilla Christian Academy.

Throughout her married life Mrs. Demott was a committed spouse, fulltime homemaker, and a mother of four children. Because of her interest and abilities in music, at middle-age, Mrs. Demott pursued formal academic training in music at the North Florida Junior College and the Florida State University School of Music.

According to Hepburn, the Baptist Heritage Award “seeks to recognize and honor those Florida Baptists who have exhibited rare and unusual dedication to the cause of Florida Southern Baptist history.” This includes having made a significant impact through such tasks as researching and writing Baptist history, teaching Baptist history, preserving Baptist history, and/or promoting the importance of Florida Southern Baptist history.

Twenty-six individuals, since 1997, have been conferred the Baptist Heritage Award by the Florida Baptist Historical Society. These persons represented a broad range of Florida Baptists including pastors, denominational workers, college and seminary professors, and laypersons, all of whom had an interest and commitment to preserving, researching and publishing about Florida Baptist history.