

Beecher Bible and Rifle Church

This is Kansas Profile. I'm Ron Wilson, director of the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development at Kansas State University.

Have you ever seen a Bible with a barrel and a bullet? That doesn't sound like any Bible I know, but there was a time when a Sharps rifle was called a "Beecher Bible." Today, an active church bears this historic name. The church is located in rural Kansas, north of the Native Stone Scenic Byway. It's today's Kansas Profile.

In a previous profile, we learned about the Native Stone Scenic Byway's many attractions, which are described on a CD and on the Wabaunsee County website. One of these attractions is the Beecher Bible and Rifle Church.

The Beecher Bible and Rifle Church is located in the town of Wabaunsee in the northern Flint Hills of Kansas. The origins of the church go back to May 1854, when Congress passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act which provided that Kansas would become a free state or a slave state, depending on the vote of the people of Kansas. Pro- and anti-slavery factions flooded into the state to influence the vote.

In New England, "Kansas Fever" ran high. The people of New Haven, Connecticut, raised money to send 60 colonists to Kansas.

Before the Connecticut-Kansas Company left for Kansas, a meeting was held in New Haven. A Yale professor pledged \$25.00 for a Sharps rifle for the Company. Then Henry Ward Beecher, the great minister from Brooklyn, NY, pledged that his congregation would give the money for twenty-five rifles if the audience would give another twenty-five. People in the crowd responded with great excitement, and soon twenty-seven had been promised. Mr. Beecher sent a check for the rifles, and with the money came twenty-five Bibles.

Newspapers throughout the country proclaimed, "Bibles and Rifles for Kansas." It was from this event that the Sharps rifle came to be called a "Beecher Bible" and the colony from Connecticut came to be known as "Beecher's Rifle and Bible Colony."

In 1856, the Company left New Haven and traveled by steamboat, train and wagon to Wabaunsee, which the company called "The New Haven of the West." Local legend, which cannot be substantiated, has it that the rifles traveled through the slave state of Missouri in boxes marked Bibles, perhaps with a layer of Bibles over the top of the guns. Henry Ward Beecher was quoted as saying that Missourians would understand the rifle better than they would understand the Bible.

In 1857, members of the Colony and other settlers organized "The First Church of Christ in Wabaunsee." After two years of raising funds, mostly in New Haven, for a church building, they started construction of the sturdy stone church that we see today. The new church was dedicated in May 1862. It became one of the largest and most influential Congregational churches in Kansas.

After 1917, as the population of the area dwindled, it was no longer possible to keep a resident minister. Eventually the old stone church was practically deserted. The last entry in the official record book was made in 1927.

In 1950 residents of Wabaunsee formed a new church group and began to hold weekly services. This was said to be the first inter-racial Congregational Church in Kansas, a fact that impressed many as a fitting tribute to the Connecticut-Kansas Colony.

Today, the Beecher Bible and Rifle Church is an independent, non-

denominational congregation. Services are still held every Sunday at 9:45 a.m. in the original stone building, which is located in the rural town of Wabaunsee with a population of probably fewer than 100 people. Now, that's rural.

Lynn Roth, a former missionary and retired schoolteacher from nearby Wamego, is the primary preacher. The building is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It does include stained glass windows which the congregation made themselves. For more information, go to www.wabaunsee.com.

Have you ever seen a Bible with a barrel and a bullet? During the era of Bleeding Kansas, the Sharps rifle came to be called a Beecher Bible, and the Beecher Bible and Rifle Church bears that historic name. We honor those brave founders who made a difference by fighting for the cause of freedom with both rifles and Bibles.

For the Huck Boyd National Institute for Rural Development, this is Ron Wilson with Kansas Profile.