

PASTOR'S BICYCLE AND HIS BIBLE

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Rev. Albert Luce began the Easter Sunday Service in Garden of the Gods

BY DAVE HUGHES

YOUR HUB CONTRIBUTOR

Albert Luce began the Easter Sunday Service in Garden of the Gods. Some oldtimers of the Pikes Peak region fondly remember the 70-year—long tradition of the Easter Sunrise Service in the Garden of the Gods. It was started by the Reverend Albert Luce, the pastor of the Church of Christ of Colorado City, 82 years ago.

Where did his inspiration come from and where did it go? After arriving in Colorado City in 1916, Rev. Luce first visited the nearby Garden of the Gods in his Model T Ford, when gas was a costly \$.13 a gallon! But because Luce's Church of Christ, which had started in a tent in 1896 in Colorado City, was on the northwest corner of what is today 25th and West Pikes Peak, the red rocks were very close by. So the Reverend started regularly to ride his bike there to meditate and draw inspiration from nature for the theme of his next Sunday's Sermon.

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On one of those visits, Rev. Luce happened to open his bible to the Book of John and read "Now in the place where 'he was crucified, there was a garden — there they laid Jesus." Of course! The "Garden" of the Gods. It would be a perfect place to share the Easter story with his flock!

The magnificent Rockies have always made men sense the handiwork and presence of God in nature. It is no accident that so many religious groups choose this area as their home. Rev. Luce shared his suggestion with his own skeptical Colorado City congregation just before Easter in 1919. Sunrise and Easter are chilly in Colorado! But they agreed to go along with him.

He held that first service inside the Gateway Rocks which would be illuminated by the rising Easter sun. It was so successful the good Reverend shared the idea with the other churches along "Church Row" — West Pikes Peak Avenue — in Colorado City. Since Rev. Luce was ecumenically-minded, the service became inter-denominational. All faiths — Methodist, Baptists, and Presbyterians — were welcome. The natural setting was so inspirational for delivering and receiving the Easter message, it began to draw worshippers and churches from all across the Pikes Peak region.

Growing from about 750 attendees in the earliest years, it soon attracted thousands. The Colorado Springs Ministerial Alliance started helping out. Three tall crosses were erected against the skyline in the open swale between the southernmost "Cathedral Rock," and a lower ridge. They remained in place all year round in that pristine setting as a reminder of the Crucifixion story.

Then came a difficult time for Rev. Luce, because the church where it all started at 2501 West Pikes Peak burned to the ground in 1931 while improvements were being made to it. Without funds to rebuild the structure, Rev. Luce had to hold services in several places, including in the WCTU offices in the middle of what was once Saloon Row in the 2500 block on Colorado Avenue.

Then, in 1934 the school board sold the large red stone 1902 Longfellow school building at 20th West Pikes Peak to Rev Luce's church. He had raised the \$2,500 needed. The school building became the church, which was renamed the Central Christian Church. "Long-fellow" can still be seen carved into the arched redstone facing.

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In 1967, the current and modern design Central Christian Church building was built on the original playground space and the two buildings — the old school building and the new church — were joined together. For years, an a cappella choir from Colorado Springs High School sang at the Easter service in the Garden.

By this time Colorado City had been dissolved, the west side was annexed to Colorado Springs, and all west side children attended the Colorado Springs High School, now called Palmer. They participated in the services.

The Easter service inspired even a richer offering than just the sermons and choral singing in a near perfect acoustical setting. A Liturgical Play began to be presented with barefoot and robed performers from the Colorado Springs Civic Players. They reenacted the Easter Crucifixion story with the towering cathedral rocks as their stage. In 1923 KVOR first broadcast the service live. As the annual event grew — by 1955 to 25,000 — worshippers arrived by cars from all over including from out of town. Their cars were parked in fields on the east side of the Gateway Rocks. Even the Colorado Springs Chamber of Commerce — always alert to an opportunity to promote tourism in the Pikes Peak region — printed and mailed 50,000 picture post cards showing the previous year's Easter Sunrise Services.

The event got national attention. It helped spur tourism during the Great Depression. By 1942 when the large Army base of Fort Carson started training soldiers to serve in World War II, there was a strong bond between national security and the practice of religion. A Fort Carson Color Guard sometimes started the Easter services. An Army Chaplain sometimes read the scriptures. And the service itself was broadcast to millions over CBS Radio, the Voice of America, and the Armed Forces Radio Network. That last feat was tricky, for early spring rain once in awhile wiped out the broadcast.

On one occasion a bird perched on a microphone, and chirped along during the service, which was broadcast too, worldwide. But it was the politically correct Ecological movement which, in the end, actually destroyed the tradition. Ecologists who were more interested in saving land than the people who live on it decided the once-a-year Easter Service was too hard on the "fragile" ecology inside the park.

First, the city forced the services out of the inside of the enclosure of the park west of the Gateway rocks, to a place east of the rocks, where Chuckwagon dinners had been held for

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decades before that tradition too was forced out. That of course diminished the unique cathedral-like spiritual environment that the service inside the Garden provided. Services in the new pedestrian location were never the same. Attendance started declining until only about 8,000 attended by 1991. The last service was held Easter Sunday 2002 when about 5,000 attended.

But Reverend Albert Luce, in his beloved Garden. inspirational idea lasted a very long time (70 years) before

environmental political correctness and religious political cynicism took over. . Luce himself served his Central Christian Church and the Easter service until 1947 when he retired after 30 years, even before the Easter Services reached their peak of attendance. Being always an active man. he still did a lot of cinema and other photography, and was part of a "Greater Colorado" organization that had promoted Colorado during the Great Depression. - He died in 1962 and was buried in Evergreen Cemetery.

His immaculate white - west side house still stands on Pikes Peak Avenue. The Central Christian Church' still thrives at 2002 West' Pikes Peak Avenue. But today's and future west side generations will never know what they missed Easter morning in "the garden."