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## Article Title: Evangelist Billy Sunday's Clean-up Campaign in Omaha: Local Reaction to His 50-Day Revival, 1915

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Article Summary: Some people criticized Sunday's flamboyance, but his tabernacle meetings attracted hundreds of thousands of people and were enthusiastically covered by the Omaha press. Sunday was said to be eager to convert Mayor Dahlman or force a recall election.

### Cataloging Information:

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Photographs / Images: Billy Sunday and his wife, Helen; inset leads of articles about the revival from Omaha newspapers; Guy R Spencer cartoon (*Omaha World-Herald*, September 15, 1915); Sunday's tabernacle, 14<sup>th</sup> and Capitol

# Evangelist Billy Sunday's Clean-up Campaign in Omaha: Local Reaction to His 50-Day Revival, 1915

*By Leslie R. Valentine*

William Ashley Sunday, probably the most famous Protestant evangelist in the early decades of this century, was born near Ames, Iowa, November 19, 1863, and died in 1935. Sunday never saw his father, who died while a soldier in the Civil War. Although his mother remarried, the future evangelist was reared primarily by his maternal grandfather, Martin Corey. In 1874 his mother placed him in a Davenport, Iowa, boys' home, where he became aware of his exceptional talent as a runner. After leaving the home Billy held odd jobs around Nevada, Iowa, and at times worked as an errand boy, janitor, fireman, and undertaker. Sunday joined a baseball team in Marshalltown, Iowa, and his ability as a base runner helped his team win the state championship in 1883. Manager Adrian C. Anson of the Chicago Whitestockings recognized Sunday's baseball skills and convinced him to join the team.<sup>1</sup> Later when discussing his years (1883-1890) as a professional baseball player, Sunday admitted he frequently drank intoxicants, swore, gambled, and attended theaters, activities then considered immoral by many Protestant denominations.<sup>2</sup> On a Chicago street-corner in 1886 Sunday became convinced his habits should change, and he experienced a "religious conversion" that altered the direction of his life.<sup>3</sup>

In 1888 he married a Chicagoan, Helen A. (Nell) Thompson. In 1890 he began to preach full-time at the Chicago Young Men's Christian Association headquarters. With his wife's encouragement Sunday decided to work in the field of evangelistic Christianity. After serving a few years as an advance man who booked revivals for noted evangelist Dr. J. Wilbur Chapman, Sunday set out on his own.<sup>4</sup> Due to his dynamic sermons and obvious sincerity, he gained the eye of

fellow evangelists. In 1900 Sunday began to develop characteristics that brought him to the forefront of American evangelism. One critic said he “began to be less concerned with grammar and pulpit dignity . . . and more eager to draw a crowd.”<sup>5</sup> His message was aimed at the blue-collar segment of society. Sunday deemed blunt language necessary to reach this group, whose vocabulary, with obvious exaggeration, had been described as “one-third . . . cuss words, one-third . . . obscenity, and one-third slang.” The evangelist believed the controversial nature of his approach would bring this element to accept his view of spiritual things.<sup>6</sup>

Billy Sunday’s flamboyance captured the attention of every level of society during his first 15 years as a preacher. His church home, however, was the main-line Presbyterian Church, USA, in which he was ordained April 15, 1903. By the time of the Omaha revival, which ran from September 4 to October 24, 1915, he had become the most popular evangelist in the country. Sunday’s evangelism gained “converts”—usually un-churched or indifferent Protestants—through his well-organized, affluent organization. Early in his career his services were characterized by a spontaneity which became stereotyped as the years wore on and seemed staged with the intent of gaining the public’s attention—and press coverage.<sup>7</sup> Sunday had pride in the great numbers of conversions he secured in each city. By 1915 the quest for converts appeared to some persons impersonal and often a mere compilation of newspaper statistics.<sup>8</sup>

Yet Billy Sunday’s audiences were still enthusiastic. Sunday went to great lengths to convince his audiences that he was a simple country preacher who knew “less about theology than a jackrabbit [knew] about ping pong.”<sup>9</sup> Actually Sunday had lived and preached in Chicago and had become wealthy by contemporary standards. He preferred to dwell upon his grass roots, childhood and simplistic rural morality.<sup>10</sup> Behind this facade was a rhetorical genius that totally captivated audiences. Sunday felt that religion began in the home, and he fought tirelessly to save it from decay. His sermons were filled with scathing criticism of those who drank alcohol, danced, and played cards which he said undermined the family and “sent thousands of souls to hell.”<sup>11</sup> The simple theology he preached attracted the public, and his enthusiastic delivery



*Billy Sunday and his wife, Helen.*

assured him their attention. His blunt language may have offended some listeners, but it succeeded in the transmission of his beliefs.

Billy Sunday had heard that things were "rotten as hell" in Omaha, he announced, as his organization constructed an 11,000-seat wooden tabernacle at 14th and Capitol in the downtown business district. When the evangelist began his seven-week, clean-up Omaha campaign, he expected much opposition.<sup>12</sup> Omaha's three major daily newspapers tempered Sunday's appraisal of the city's iniquity yet supported his revival to the extent of printing his sermons in their entirety. Declaring Omaha was the first city where the "whiskey gang" had not tried to "gag and throttle" the press, Sunday was gratified with the magnitude of support he received in Omaha—admittedly more than he had received in any community prior to 1915.<sup>13</sup> A cursory view of the newspapers published in the greater Omaha area indicates that this may not have been exaggeration. The front pages were full of it, topped by big headlines with decks crammed with details. The editorial columns evaluated his sermons, often in as much hyperbole as were his homilies. Feature articles, well illustrated, spread over inside pages. Side-bars and boxed tabular material kept the statistics of the revival. In perspective, 60 years following the event, the coverage seems extravagant, with reporters eager to comment on controversial religious dogma.

The most sympathetic coverage came from the *Omaha Daily News*, which was impressed with the organizational ability of Sunday's entourage, believing its commercial aspects necessary to achieving its purposes. Omahans should expect to "gasp and shiver a bit" in reaction to Billy Sunday, but the good brought by his campaign justified its "disconcerting approach," the *News* said. It hoped that Sunday could help rid the city of "civic corruption, vice, greed, and liquor." Hoping for a change in Omaha's "civic and social life," the *News* looked forward to increased religious activity it thought might follow a Sunday crusade.<sup>14</sup>

In its support of Sunday, the newspaper explained his slang and pulpit antics as the expression of religious sincerity—the urge to use "real language" when speaking to "real people." On the drunkenness issue the *News* agreed with Sunday that

alcohol was a major threat to the stability of the American home. The *News*, contrary to the policy of other newspapers in town, refused to carry advertisements for liquor and undoubtedly believed as Sunday believed—that the “quicker a newspaper that accepts liquor ads goes to hell, the better for the community.”<sup>15</sup>

In an editorial the newspaper argued that Sunday’s methods had “shaken, driven, frightened, many [Omahans] out of some measure of . . . indifference,” and the result was an improved community. The paper criticized some local churches for their overly refined approach to religion and said Sunday’s methods were irrelevant if they brought a spiritual awakening to Omaha. Sunday was compared to Jesus, who also shocked the “orthodox” people of his day and was “sent to death by the most devout people on the charge that he was a blasphemer.” The *News* concluded that the people of Omaha should support the revival.<sup>16</sup>

An equally supportive reaction came from the *Omaha Bee*. The *Bee* remarked before the revival that Sunday’s advance representatives were such adept organizers there might not be anything left for the evangelist to accomplish. Its view was that if Sunday did not secure a large number of converts it was not “the fault of the advance guard.”<sup>17</sup> After Sunday’s first week in the city, the *Bee* admitted it was too early to assess the results of the crusade but claimed the revival was “mutually surprising and mutually agreeable” to that point. In an editorial the *Bee* focused upon the large number of people who had heard the evangelist and the newspaper said he was not out to “destroy” the city, as critics feared. To the contrary, remarked the *Bee*, Sunday found Omaha was “not especially in need of destruction,” and the quality of life in Omaha improved after each tabernacle meeting.<sup>18</sup>

In contrast to the *News*, however, there was a limit to *Bee* support of Sunday. The *Bee* took exception to Sunday’s claim during the first weeks of the revival that “tightwad” Omahans failed to contribute adequately to the campaign and called for a public retraction, which Sunday ignored. The *Bee* printed a chart that showed Omaha contributions had kept pace with Des Moines, Iowa, and Paterson, New Jersey, cities of similar size.<sup>19</sup> Seven days later the *Bee* announced the collections, “while up to the mark all the time [were] now far in the lead of

all records previously made in any city anywhere near" the size of Omaha.<sup>20</sup>

The *Bee* also responded in print to public criticism of the attention given to Sunday. The paper saw two sides to this controversy: Those who supported Sunday wanted even more newspaper coverage, while critics of the evangelist wanted more general news and "less religion" in their newspaper. The *Bee* admitted coverage of the revival often crowded out news of the war in Europe. In defense, the *Bee* said this was justifiable, due to great attendance at tabernacle services, which had approached 180,000 by the end of the second week. What other news item, asked the *Bee*, drew the "interest of an equal number of men, women and children?"<sup>21</sup>

The *World-Herald* marveled at the interest Sunday generated in Omaha and acknowledged the revival was "uppermost in the public mind." It was not necessary, it said, to approve of Sunday's methods and mannerisms to praise his attempts to make Omaha a city with stronger Christian ethics. The paper described Sunday as a second saviour urging heathens to "uplift their faces from the dust and catch a glimpse of Eternity's sun."<sup>22</sup>

*World-Herald* approval of the Billy Sunday crusade faded a bit when it editorialized on the religious converts or "trail-hitters," a slang-term. To "hit the trail" people came forward at the conclusion of a sermon by Sunday to publicly "convert" and "accept Christ as their Saviour." The revival by October had gained 4,700 conversions, a figure the *World-Herald* examined closely. Of the 4,700 "new-born" Christians, the *World-Herald* said, 45 percent, or 2,100, were children who "came forward" at special juvenile meetings. The remaining 2,600 converts had professed their faith at regular nightly services, though 500 of these were also children. The newspaper announced that 1,000 of the 2,100 adult converts were "re-consecrates"—those who were already practicing Christianity but wished to become more active.<sup>23</sup>

The *Omaha World-Herald* did not belittle the importance of re-consecration but commented that "many church members [were] as false to Christian principles as many non-church members." Gaining religious converts was the goal of the revival, but the *World-Herald* thought "mere numbers [did] not tell the tale." Since more than 50 percent of the con-

verts by October were juveniles, the *World-Herald* said the Sunday campaign had not been numerically productive. For Omaha to become a Christian city, the *World-Herald* editorialized, the religious base must be firm and not be founded on "thoughtless, sheep-like conversions of children and giggling girls."<sup>24</sup>

But the generally sympathetic support for Sunday in the Omaha press was minimal when compared to the lavish praise he won from the Iowa side of the Missouri River in the *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*. That paper labeled Billy Sunday's sermons "virile, spectacular, forceful, and effective."<sup>25</sup> The *Nonpareil* described Sunday as a "moral and religious cyclone," stating it took a strong and dynamic personality to rescue people from "thirty or forty years of sin."<sup>26</sup> The Council Bluffs newspaper thought the controversy over Sunday's methods "petty" and meaningless when compared to the good will brought to the Midwest by the Omaha revival.<sup>27</sup> At the conclusion of the revival, the *Nonpareil* declared it of value to the community as the result of the abilities of Billy Sunday and his staff. The *Nonpareil* sniffed: "This margin of advantage in morals and religion . . . [was] no doubt due to the fact that [Omaha was] located near Council Bluffs."<sup>28</sup>

The sympathetic treatment of metropolitan area daily newspapers toward the Sunday revival was not mirrored by all publications in the city. The *Omaha Excelsior*, a weekly public affairs magazine, on September 18 took exception to Sunday's criticism of socially prominent women. Sunday had labeled society matrons "selfish" prigs and stated that "if something would come and sweep [them] away . . . the world would be well off without them." The *Excelsior* printed a list of prominent society women and argued Omaha was a better place due to their "constant patronage and unflagging interest" in good enterprises. The *Excelsior* credited wealthy, prominent women with "a very large share of every form of charity" in the city.<sup>29</sup>

The magazine admitted it had been doubtful of the value of Sunday's ministry at the outset. The *Excelsior* remained unimpressed and refused to "rank the evangelist as an indispensable asset to humanity." The paper commented that it was unfortunate it took a man of coarse language and crude methods to try to reform Omaha. Sunday's influence, if at all positive, in

the city, it indicated, may have resulted from prior "failure on the part of the church people to cooperate in their efforts and to support [their] own cause." Eventually, the *Excelsior* said Omaha must not be "blinded by the tremulous success" Sunday had apparently achieved but must "absorb some of his spirit and use it along legitimate lines of Christian endeavor."<sup>30</sup>

Of all commentaries upon the Sunday revival, the greatest criticism came from the *Omaha Examiner*, whose editor, the redoubtable Alfred Sorenson, described his publication as "the standard independent, political, social, religious, and scientific weekly paper" in the Midwest.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the weeks of the revival Sorenson used the pages of the *Examiner* to launch satirical attacks upon Sunday. Sorenson scathingly referred to the attempts of Sunday's advance representatives to secure proper expense assurances for the Omaha visit. The *Examiner* viewed this as proof the evangelist wanted "his own bank account . . . considerably augmented."<sup>32</sup> The *Examiner* considered Billy Sunday a religious hack "whose clangy and vulgar expressions [were] swallowed without protest by an emotional mob."<sup>33</sup> In contrast to the *Daily News*, Sorenson did not consider Sunday "Christlike" and doubted Jesus would suggest "smashing anyone in the jaw" or carry a grudge against those who disagreed with him. Christ, said the *Examiner*, "forgave his critics and enemies. He didn't tell them to go to hell."<sup>34</sup>

While Omaha publications provided a variety of opinions regarding Billy Sunday, there were other agencies which took positions on the revival. On October 4 Omaha became one of only two cities between 1906 and 1918 whose Board of Education refused to allow Sunday to address its students.<sup>35</sup> By a vote of seven to three after a "heated and personal" session, the board turned down a petition by over 700 students and teachers who believed Sunday's talk would be beneficial. Speaking for those board members who favored the proposal, Dr. Daniel Jenkins, president of the University of Omaha, considered the negative vote "a lack of broad-mindedness." Jenkins argued Sunday had promised to give a non-sectarian address on "ethics, abolition of tobacco, [and] moralism." Board member Robert Cowell, an Omaha businessman speaking for the majority, thought if Sunday were allowed to speak

# WOMAN'S CLUB HAS DEBATE ON SUNDAY

Follow Up  
question that Evangelist Starts  
by Members.

# REVIVAL BEGINS AT 10:30 A. M. TODAY

Meetings at Tabernacle Start  
This Morning With Sunday

# TIPS TO TABERNACLE GOERS

Do not be late. You will not be seated after Sunday begins talking.  
If you have to cough, make as little noise as possible, not whisper.  
If you find one doorway crowded, go to another.  
Eighteen available to the general public.  
This morning's meeting starts at 10:30 and the night meeting at 2 and the night meeting at 10.

# "BRING ON YOUR DEVIL," SAYS BILLY

Famous Evangelist Announces  
He Is Here to Fight Satan  
and All His Aides.

# BIG TABERNACLE IS DEDICATED

Crowd of 6,000 Hears Bishop  
Bristol Preach Sermon  
Last Night.

"US," HE SAYS

# BOOZE WILL GET NO QUARTER

Billy Sunday, evangelist, in his rooms in the Hotel Loyal Saturday with coat, collar and belt discarded, declared he had come to Omaha to fight the devil and all his aides.

"He's the same old devil he was 2,000 years ago," said Sunday. "He's working on the same old principle: 'Keep your hands off a man's heart and man will do the rest.'"

Billy very evidently was sure of his ability to whip the devil in a straight, clean fight, with all fouls barred, but expressed his conviction that the devil and his friends never fight fair.

Religion Can Save Humanity.

# PREPARATIONS FOR BIG REVIVAL COMPLETED

Builder Leaves for  
Rest Before **WORLD-HERALD** Ginning  
Next Structure.

# SUNDAY AND THE SCHOOLS.

The refusal of the Omaha school board to permit Billy Sunday to address the pupils on the subject of religion was based, we fear, not so much on principle as on personal grounds. Mr. Sunday has offended certain persons by his preaching. To permit

# CATHOLIC VOICE

campaign Sunday seeks will be fired in the

Omaha newspaper readers avidly followed Billy Sunday's crusade.

in the public schools it would offend many people. He objected to Sunday's criticism of Unitarians and Christian Scientists and said he preferred to pattern his life after the "morals, ethics, and religion" of some of those Sunday criticised.<sup>36</sup> On October 18 the board again refused a petition allowing Sunday to address Omaha students.<sup>37</sup>

Sunday considered the decision of the school board deplorable and consigned each member to perdition—including those that voted in his favor. Calling its members "mutts," the evangelist did not believe the board had acted out of conviction but felt it had been influenced by liquor interests conspiring to keep him out of the Omaha schools. Sunday stated Omahans had to hold their "noses to avoid the stench from those people."<sup>38</sup>

The *Daily News* supported the negative vote and thought the action of the board was "honestly sincere." After he calmed down, said the *News*, Sunday would realize board members were not destined for hell and he might meet them at the gates of heaven with open arms.<sup>39</sup> The *Bee* argued against religious instruction in the public schools, "no matter [in] what disguise it may seek admission." The methods Sunday utilized were not at issue, said the *Bee* in praising the action of the board.<sup>40</sup> The *Nonpareil*, however, disagreed with the board, since Sunday had promised to give a non-sectarian address.<sup>41</sup>

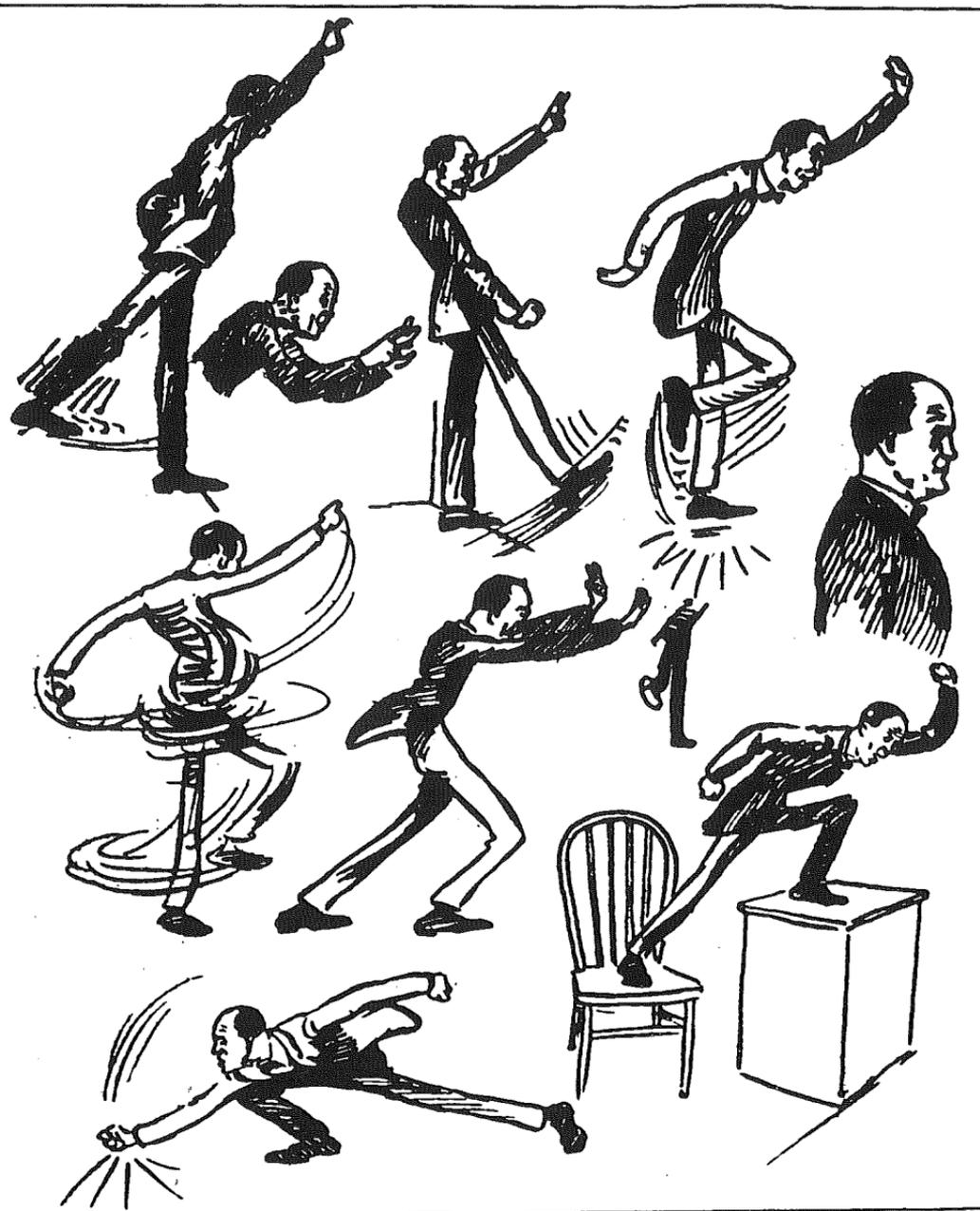
The Omaha business community, a combination of Catholics, Jews, and Protestants, of course, remained neutral—in the main—regarding the Sunday revival. Some wealthy businessmen in other cities had supported Sunday, taking the position his campaigns would improve the community, "so that decent and substantial citizens would settle there, raise real estate prices, and increase business."<sup>42</sup> Individual Omaha businessmen must have approved of the Sunday revival, but the minutes of the Omaha Chamber of Commerce executive committee and the pages of the *Commercial Club of Omaha Journal* made little mention of Sunday or the revival.<sup>43</sup> The throngs at the revival, as a matter of course, brought a great increase in downtown business activity, especially to restaurants.<sup>44</sup> Omaha business people were undoubtedly pleased with the financial gains brought to the downtown area by the tabernacle meetings.

Sunday showed why his revivals were so controversial when he attacked the Christian Science Church, which he said was "three parts mental suggestion, three parts Hindoophitia, three parts religion, and ninety-one parts pure humbug."<sup>45</sup> He denounced Mary Baker Eddy, founder and leader of the Christian Science Church. Sunday claimed she had promised to rise from the dead and he exclaimed: "If old Mother Eddy crawls out of her grave before the resurrection, I'll eat a pole cat for breakfast and wash it down with whiskey."<sup>46</sup>

In an unusually critical letter to the *Omaha Daily News*, Carl E. Herring, a member of Omaha's First Church of Christ Science and of the church's state committee on publications, replied to Sunday's attack. Herring compared the zeal of Sunday and his followers with that of the flagellants who received "great satisfaction, while rubbing their own sores, in witnessing the abuse heaped upon their neighbors and friends." Herring lamented Sunday's coarseness and hoped some Omahans retained the "rudiments of sanity" after exposure to this "Sodom of righteous thinking." Christian Science, he wrote, did not preach Mary Eddy's resurrection, and Herring urged his church to rise above Sunday's "medieval" beliefs to continue the search for "salvation from sin, sickness, and poverty."<sup>47</sup>

Another defense of Christian Science came from the *Examiner*. Editor Sorenson defended the church, although not a Christian Scientist himself, and said the church did much good in the community. If Sunday and his followers went to a Christian Science meeting they would find a group of "intelligent, reverential, prosperous, sober, contented and happy people," Sorenson said, and they would discover "there [was] more real good in the Christian Science Church than in a thousand Billy Sundays."<sup>48</sup>

Catholicism escaped most of Billy Sunday's wrath—for practical reasons. Catholics were numerous and held much political power in some urban areas and Sunday "needed the full co-operation of the city councils and police forces . . . to run his city-wide campaigns." In addition, Sunday's "wealthy backers [often] hesitated to antagonize Catholic business associates and friends."<sup>49</sup> Perhaps because of Sunday's neutrality concerning the Catholic Church, the response of the Omaha archdiocesan paper to the revival was relatively



Cartoonist Guy R. Spencer caricatured Billy Sunday's speaking style in the September 15, 1915, Omaha World-Herald.

favorable. Before the revival began, Omaha's Catholic newspaper, the *True Voice*, expressed uncertainty as to the necessity for the Sunday campaign. The newspaper did not approve of Sunday's language or his "improper method of evangelism." The *True Voice* thought it unfortunate that someone with Sunday's talents and faith was "not on the right road." Because Sunday "always had a friendly word for the Catholic Church," the *True Voice* thought Catholics should look at him kindly, and offer him encouragement, while recognizing Sunday would face some difficulty cleaning up Omaha.<sup>50</sup>

In his previous campaigns Mr. Sunday has always had a friendly word for the Catholic Church. He is no bigot, whatever may be his other faults. For this reason Catholics always have a kindly feeling for Mr. Sunday. If he can do anything to make Omaha better morally, he deserves encouragement in his efforts along that line. We think he will have a hard campaign in this city; but we also think that he is equal to it. We are waiting for the "clean up" to start.

After the first week of the campaign, the *True Voice* announced its agreement with Sunday, when the evangelist claimed he had no intention of trying to convert what he called the "bum Catholic." The *True Voice* agreed Sunday had "no message for Catholics," and if the Catholic Church could not reach them they were unreachable. The *Voice* saw Sunday's role as attempting to save the "back-sliding Protestant" and as an "exponent of Christian morals as opposed to neo-paganism."<sup>51</sup>

The *True Voice* supported the Omaha School Board decision that prevented Sunday from speaking in the public schools. The paper claimed Sunday's "impudent" followers did anything to "secure audiences for him." Since the question of preventing religious speakers from addressing public school students had been raised, the *True Voice* suggested year-end baccalaureate services also be abolished by the board. If the school board had arrived at its decision with no regard to "the personality of Billy Sunday," Catholics would have seen a definite accomplishment. The *True Voice* felt only the fear of offending "a few Unitarians and Christian Scientists" had prompted the school board decision. It was doubtful, said Omaha's Catholic newspaper, that the board would have given identical consideration "to the conscientious scruples of Catholic patrons of the public schools."<sup>52</sup>

The strongest criticism levied by the *True Voice* came after Billy Sunday condemned smokers, dancers, and card players. The newspaper expressed regret that Sunday could not "get away from the extremist views that brought Puritanism into disrepute in this country." The *True Voice* believed Sunday should keep to the Ten Commandments and refrain from inventing his own code of morality. When Sunday insisted "on the observation of God's law," he found support from the *True Voice*. When Sunday threatened hell fire for persons finding pleasure in common amusements, the *True Voice* labeled him ineffective and "characteristically Protestant."<sup>53</sup>

For several years a so-called "Omaha Gang" had controlled the city—a political machine headed by Tom Dennison.<sup>54</sup> The evangelist called members of the gang "the lowest imps this side of hell and believed threats by machine leaders prevented many people from attending revival services.<sup>55</sup> Sunday declared the "miserable dirty blacklegs . . . [had] dominated" Omaha too long. This group, predicted Sunday, would soon be defeated at the polls and "go out of Nebraska forever."<sup>56</sup> The *World-Herald* recalled Sunday had been critical "for a number of years" of long-time Omaha Mayor James C. Dahlman.<sup>57</sup> During the Omaha revival, though, the evangelist had nothing but kind words for the mayor. When asked about Dahlman, Sunday praised his honesty, insisting the mayor did not have "a crooked hair in his head" and was "a fine fellow"—someone who kept his word.<sup>58</sup>

Dahlman reacted to Sunday's praise in a similar manner. The mayor called Sunday "absolutely sincere" and expected Omaha's morality to improve because of Sunday's ministry. Sunday appealed to all classes of people, Dahlman said—"the working man, the laborer, the coal miner, [and] the railroader," and each left the tabernacle with a personal message. When Dahlman attended a Sunday revival service, he sat conspicuously in the front row. Although he did not join those "converted" the mayor enthusiastically sang each song "without the aid of a songbook."<sup>59</sup> In addition Dahlman purchased 25 hymnals and began a choir in his political organization, the Dahlman Democracy Club.<sup>60</sup>

The *Omaha World-Herald*, reacting to the good feeling between Dahlman and Sunday, said the two men had much in common. Though Sunday preached religion and Dahlman

preached "democracy," the *World-Herald* noted they both used plain language to reach "plain people." The *World-Herald* seemed certain the mayor planned to "hit the trail."<sup>61</sup> The *Bee*, amused at the cordiality between the previously antagonistic Dahlman and Sunday camps, speculated Dahlman might be "converted." The *Bee* suggested that most of city hall awaited Dahlman's decision to join and desired to follow his lead.<sup>62</sup> Like the *World-Herald*, the *Bee* appeared convinced the idea appealed to the mayor because it brought back memories of his simple cowboy days in the Nebraska Sandhills "when he faced many hardships among real western cattle trails."

At the conclusion of the revival, after Dahlman's failure to make a close alliance with Sunday, the *Bee* commented on the mayor's slick handling of the matter. Labeling Dahlman "Foxy Jim," the newspaper described the mayor as "the one figure [who] made a winning with a losing hand." The Sunday staff had wanted to visit Omaha before city elections the preceding spring, the *Bee* said, to "inundate Jim and sweep him out of the city hall." Sunday could not arrange an Omaha revival then, but the *Bee* felt one of his objectives on arrival in

*The Billy Sunday tabernacle, 14th and Capitol, was the center of Sunday's 1915 Omaha crusade.*



Omaha was to stir up enough righteous indignation to force a recall election. The *Bee* explained Mayor Dahlman's piety and support of Sunday during the revival made this impossible. The mayor went to all lengths to cooperate with the campaign staff and assigned an escort of policemen to the evangelist. Dahlman provided use of the city auditorium for special prayer meetings free of charge, and leaked a false report to the press that he planned to convert. The *Bee* considered Dahlman's fence-straddling brilliant and stated "nothing but the cunning of the fox could have so neatly escaped the trap."<sup>63</sup>

The *Omaha Examiner* agreed with the *Bee* and thought the name "Foxy Jim" was "well earned and well deserved." Alfred Sorenson said Billy Sunday's "greatest ambition" was to convince the mayor to convert. Because Dahlman and Sunday "fell all over each other in their laudations," the conversion had seemed imminent up to the last day of the revival. The final victory, however, was Dahlman's, who had prompted such praise from Sunday that "the evangelist could or would not stultify himself by roasting" the mayor. Dahlman's piety ended with the revival's end when he refused to give the revival choir free use of the city auditorium. Dahlman now felt that such a precedent would "open the doors to all sorts of free entertainments."<sup>64</sup>

At times Sunday's claim of organized opposition to his revival seemed credible. On September 21 the evangelist received a letter warning the tabernacle would be blown up on Thursday, September 23, if Sunday did not leave town. Omaha Police Chief Henry W. Dunn assigned extra guards to protect the tabernacle and members of the Sunday party.<sup>65</sup> Eight undercover officers attended services on the date, but no explosion occurred.<sup>66</sup> Billy Sunday, himself, did not consider the bomb threat legitimate. Seemingly unfrightened, the evangelist stated he was used to threatening letters. Sunday said he would already "have been blown up, shot, poisoned, and [his] throat cut, [and his] heart eaten out" in cities all over the country had every threat been legitimate.<sup>67</sup> The *Examiner* said it believed the Sunday organization had fabricated the letter as a publicity stunt. The publication of "such fool and fake letters," warned Sorenson, "might lead some prank to carry out the threats."<sup>68</sup>

During the Omaha revival Billy Sunday spoke to more than 742,000 people—a figure more than three times the population of the city—during which 13,000 persons professed to accept Sunday's brand of Christianity.<sup>69</sup> Without the interest of communities outside Omaha this attendance figure would have been impossible. Special groups from towns in eastern Nebraska and western Iowa reserved seats at the tabernacle and came to Omaha by the trainload. Due to great response from Omaha and the surrounding area, this seven-week revival could be considered one of the memorable events in the history of the city. Collections from Omahans whom Sunday had at first labeled "tightwads" totaled more than \$27,000, and as was usual in Sunday's revivals, collections ceased after that figure was reached.<sup>70</sup>

Sunday, as a matter of policy, received special collections taken during the last week of his revivals. In Omaha these "thank-you" offerings amounted to more than \$18,000, one-third of which went for staff salaries, and he kept the remaining \$12,000.<sup>71</sup> Though criticized, the evangelist had no qualms about accepting these contributions, nor about his reputation as a wealthy man. He said his income was "nobody's business" and "the Lord gave him his money."<sup>72</sup>

At the beginning of the campaign, Sunday was critical of Omaha as a city needing reform. By the end of October he had tempered his criticism substantially.<sup>73</sup> Perhaps he hesitated to condemn the morals of a city he had just spent seven weeks trying to improve. Critics were divided about Sunday's pulpit methods. Sunday had made himself controversial by his entry into the secular-political field, and the press eagerly entered the lists. When Sunday dealt with iniquity in the vernacular, he was generally applauded. Yet, those unaccustomed to slang from the pulpit were offended and believed he did more harm than good. All agreed, though, that for seven weeks Omaha was a community whose thoughts were focused on Billy Sunday and his attempts to see his interpretation of Christianity prevail.

## NOTES

1. William G. McLoughlin, *Billy Sunday Was His Real Name* (Chicago: University Press, 1955), 1-4.
2. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 17, 1915; Gordon T. Hall, *The Sawdust Trail* (Philadelphia: Macrae Smith Co., 1964), 134.
3. McLoughlin, *Sunday*, 6; Homer Rodeheaver, *Twenty Years with Billy Sunday* (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1936), 47-56.
4. McLoughlin, *Sunday*, 9-10; Rodeheaver, *Twenty Years*, 89.
5. McLoughlin, *Sunday*, 17.
6. *Ibid.*, 164.
7. *Ibid.*, 73; Karen Gullen, ed., *Billy Sunday Speaks* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1970), 7; Rodeheaver, *Twenty Years*, 97-106, 119-126; *Who's Who in America. . .1930-1931* (Chicago: Marquis Co.), 2138.
8. From the first call for converts, newspapers printed a running total of "trail-hitters" and there was wide speculation as to the number Sunday would attain in Omaha.
9. McLoughlin, *Sunday*, 123.
10. *Ibid.*, 26.
11. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 15, 1915; William G. McLoughlin, *Modern Revivalism* (New York: The Ronald Press Company, 1959), Bernard A. Weisberger, *They Gathered At The River* (New York: Octagon Books, 1979), and John Kent,  *Holding The Fort* (London: Epworth Press, 1978).
12. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 4, October 8, 1915.
13. *Ibid.*, October 18, 1915; *Omaha Bee*, October 26, 28, 1915.
14. *Omaha Sunday Daily News*, September 5, 1915.
15. *Ibid.*; *Omaha Daily News*, September 10, 1915.
16. *Omaha Daily News*, October 25, 1915.
17. *Omaha Bee*, August 24, 1915. May Berenbaum, "'The Greatest Show That Ever Came to Town'—An Account of the Billy Sunday Crusade in Buffalo, New York, January 27-March 25, 1917," *Niagara Frontier*, Vol. 22, No. 3, 1975, 54-56.
18. *Omaha Sunday Bee*, September 12, 1915.
19. *Omaha Bee*, September 14, 1915.
20. *Ibid.*, September 21, 1915. The financial aspect of Sunday's revivals and the wealth he achieved from them were a constant factor of controversy throughout his career. McLoughlin, *Sunday*, 73-117.
21. *Omaha Sunday Bee*, September 19, 1915.
22. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 30, 1915.
23. *Ibid.*, October 1, 1915.
24. *Ibid.*
25. *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, September 9, 1915.
26. *Ibid.*, August 13, 1915.
27. *Ibid.*, September 5, 1915.
28. *Ibid.*, October 26, 1915.
29. *Omaha Excelsior*, September 18, 1915.
30. *Ibid.*, October 30, 1915.
31. *Omaha Examiner*, September 11, 1915.
32. *Ibid.*, August 28, 1915.
33. *Ibid.*, September 27, 1915.
34. *Ibid.*, October 23, 1915.
35. Omaha Board of Education Minutes, October 4, 1915, 529; McLoughlin, *Sunday*, 95.
36. *Omaha Daily News*, October 5, 1915; *Omaha World-Herald*, October 5, 1915.
37. *Omaha Daily News*, October 19, 1915; *Omaha World-Herald*, October 19, 1915.

38. *Omaha Bee*, October 20, 23, 1915; *Omaha World-Herald*, October 19, 1915. On the same day as the Omaha School Board refusal, the school board in Benson, an Omaha suburb, agreed to allow Billy Sunday to speak to grades 6-12. *Benson Times*, October 8, 1915; *Omaha Daily News*, October 5, 1915; *Omaha Bee*, October 9, 1915; *Omaha World-Herald*, October 5, 1915.
39. *Omaha Daily News*, October 22, 1915.
40. *Omaha Bee*, September 2, October 6, 1915.
41. *Council Bluffs Nonpareil*, October 7, 1915.
42. McLoughlin, *Sunday*, 28; *Omaha World-Herald*, September 9, 1915.
43. Omaha Chamber of Commerce, Executive Committee Minutes, September 28, 1915; *Commercial Club of Omaha Journal*, Vol. 4, No. 15, October 2, 1915.
44. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 11, 1915; Johanna A. Valentine, private interview, Omaha, September 17, 1979.
45. McLoughlin, *Sunday*, 151.
46. *Omaha Bee*, September 13, 1915.
47. *Omaha Daily News*, September 17, 1915. The Christian Science Church was less critical when Carl Herring wrote in the *Christian Science Sentinel*, Vol. 18, No. 10, November 6, 1915, 188-189; No. 14, December 4, 1915, 269; and No. 15, December 11, 1915, 289.
48. *Omaha Examiner*, September 18, 1915.
49. McLoughlin, *Sunday*, 148.
50. *True Voice*, September 3, 1915. Seventeen months later in Buffalo, New York, the Catholic Church discouraged its members from attending the revival. Christian Scientists also boycotted the revival. Berenbaum, "Buffalo Crusade," 61.
51. *True Voice*, September 10, 1915.
52. *Ibid.*, October 8, 1915.
53. *Ibid.*, October 15, 1915.
54. John Kyle Davis, "The Grey Wolf: Tom Dennison of Omaha," *Nebraska History* Vol. 58 (Spring, 1977), 25-52.
55. *Omaha Daily News*, October 23, 1915; *Omaha Sunday Daily News*, September 19, 1915.
56. *Omaha Sunday Daily News*, October 24, 1915.
57. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 10, 1915, 10. Tom Dennison was a rather mysterious character. Although Mayor Dahlman was probably involved with Dennison, the exact relationship between the two men remains uncertain.
58. *Omaha Bee*, September 9, 1915; *Omaha Examiner*, September 11, 1915.
59. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 8, 1915; *Omaha Sunday Bee*, September 12, 1915.
60. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 10, 1915.
61. *Ibid.*
62. *Omaha Bee*, September 11, 1915.
63. *Ibid.*, October 27, 1915.
64. *Omaha Examiner*, October 30, 1915.
65. *Omaha World-Herald*, September 22, 1915.
66. *Ibid.*, September 23, 1915.
67. *Ibid.*
68. *Omaha Examiner*, September 27, 1915.
69. *Omaha World-Herald*, October 25, 1915.
70. *Omaha Bee*, September 13, 1915; Rodeheaver, *Twenty Years*, 11.
71. *Omaha World-Herald*, October 16, 1915; October 18, 1915, 2; October 25, 1915, 3; *Omaha Bee*, October 26, 1915, 6; McLoughlin, *Sunday*, 107; Rodeheaver, *Twenty Years*, 112.
72. McLoughlin, *Sunday*, 116.
73. *Omaha World-Herald*, October 18, 1915; October 20, 1915; *Omaha Bee*, October 26, 1915.