

**HISTORY SUNDAY**  
**FEBRUARY 11, 2007**

Presented by  
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In the years just before our church was organized members of the Coalson family in the Upper Nueces Canyon and members of the McLaurin family on the West Prong of the Frio Canyon were killed by Indians. That was pretty much the last of the Indian War in Texas.

In 1882, the year of our charter, the first railroad tracks reached Uvalde. The region around Uvalde was the rendezvous of bad characters, desperadoes, cattle thieves and outlaws like Bill Longley, John Wesley Hardin, John King Fisher, Ben Thompson and Billy the Kid. Butch Cassidy (his real name was George Parker) and his Hole in the Wall Gang at times hid out in the upper Nueces Canyon. They were colorful, hard riding, gunslingers who were admired by young boys of that time. That made the outlaws not only a threat to property and life they were a bad influence on the young people.

Consequently when Presbytery assigned young Reverend James R. Bridges to the Uvalde field he was welcomed by town and canyon folk alike. He gathered together a few families eager to help and within a year or so organized this church.

Years later, Doctor Bridges returned to Texas. He had for many years been editor of the Presbyterian Standard and president of a university and was in San Antonio for the 64<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church. Bridges was interviewed by a reporter from the San Antonio Evening News and told what his life had been like in Uvalde in 1882. Then in July, 1924 that same story was reprinted in Bandera's Frontier Times magazine. I am going to tell you Reverend Bridges story and because I will use quotes from what the preacher said to the newspaper reporter, the language will sometimes sound formal and old fashioned.

The Frontier Times story is titled: Fighting Days in Uvalde.

"The State was young then, Bridges said, and wild with the recklessness of youth. The gun-man ruled; the gambler reigned; saloons stood where churches now decorate the landscape, and many men died daily "with their boots on".

"In 1881", he said, "the Presbytery of West Texas requested that the assembly send two evangelists to that territory to care for the rapidly growing population, and

in response to this request F.P. Ramsay was sent to Laredo and I was being sent to far west Texas.

Before reaching my field, however, I was informed that the presbytery had decided to send me to its eastern section to take the place of Rev. J.H. Zivley.

"When in the fall of 1881, I reached San Antonio and attended the called meeting of the presbytery I found the home mission committee at sea as to what to do. Zivley, after a few months experience at Uvalde, had concluded that a frontier town would not do for his family.

"After the cowboys had "shot up" the town one or two nights, Zivley also concluded that if he remained there he would probably die entirely with his boots on, a variety of death entirely unsuited to a minister. The circumstances were related in his plea for a change of locale.

"I was accordingly transferred to Uvalde to care for that territory running west to the Rio Grande and northeast into Bandera County, requiring 350 miles of horseback riding each month. As the railway from San Antonio to El Paso at that time was only completed to Sabinas Station, about 60 miles from San Antonio and 22 miles from Uvalde, I had to ride that distance in an old fashioned (stage) coach hung on leather straps. It gave a motion like a ship at sea.

"My first sight of Uvalde was not cheerful," Bridges continued, "The town was filled with men who were engaged in (rail)road work. Apparently they were from the slums of New York, as wild and desperate a set of men as I have ever seen.

"The hotel where I had to stay was kept by a man who was a congenial spirit with his guests. The stores were frame, streets were stretches of dust in summer and mud in winter, and wherever one went he heard the most terrible oaths. Drunkenness was a common sin, and a too reckless use of the six-shooter seemed to be the most popular amusement especially at night when the cowboys would at times take possession of the town - in their vernacular 'paint it red'.

"The hotel was of two stories, half finished, so one could easily count the stars through the openings in the roof and hear the whiz of bullets when the game was at its height.

"On one occasion the correspondent of the San Antonio Express, known as 'Greely No 2' from his resemblance to Horace Greely, had to share my room, and as the welkin {an archaic poetic term meaning vault of the sky) rang with the

whiz of bullets he lay there in expectation of death, while I, being hardened to such amusements, slept quietly and soundly.

"The surrounding country was occupied by sheepmen and cattlemen, who often came into town filled with whisky, and sometimes fought with the authorities if the latter tried to control them. Then they sometimes fought with each other, so that we soon grew accustomed to murders, taking them as a part of a day's performance.

"After a while I was able to get a comfortable home on the edge of town with an old couple, who were kind and good. (They were Mr. and Mrs. Hulett Griner who lived on the east bank of the Leona River where Uvalde Country Club now stands.) The Griners "were afflicted with a set of boys that had almost broken their hearts. There was a feud between them and some Mexicans, with the result that three of the boys had been killed by Mexicans, and the other boys had killed several Mexicans. Once by reason of my resemblance to the oldest Griner son, a wealthy sheep man, I was nearly shot by Mexicans lying in ambush, while I was coming back from a trip on horseback to the Rio Grande River. (The story of the Griner/Mexican feud is a long and complicated one involving a love triangle between Jones Griner, his wife Joaquina Rivera and her cousin Alvino Perez and the disposition of Jones Griners' estate after his death.)

Bridges continues, "With Uvalde as my base, I began to work westward and northward, and in course of time we organized churches at Uvalde, Del Rio, 80 miles west, and at Bandera, 80 miles northeast, and I had a regular appointment at Montell in the Nueces canyon. Besides these regular preaching places, I preached at times in the Frio Canyon. These appointments were 80 miles from Uvalde, with the exception of one in the Nueces Canyon, which was about 40 miles.

"A tough mustang pony was my mode of traveling, and when I started out I was a facsimile edition of a Methodist circuit rider, being equipped with saddle bags, a canteen for water, a 'slicker' for rain or 'a norther', and a coil of rope for staking out the pony at night. Sometimes I shared the 'bed and board' of a teamster which generally consisted of a greasy blanket for covering, a sack of corn for a pillow, and black coffee, fat meat and cold bread. At other times I would share the garret with the hired man, not to mention some of the original occupants of the bed. (bedbugs?)

'The preaching was often done under difficulties, sometimes in an adobe, but with dirt floor, grass roof and soap boxes for seats. At one point near the Mexican border my night services were held in a hotel dining room, across from a large tent in which there was always going on a game of faro, the dealer's cry combining very delightfully with that of the preacher; and where once a gang of roughs tried to stampede the congregation by firing a pistol inside the room, while drunken men were trying to climb through the windows.

"If space permitted I could tell of delightful companionship with Josephus Johnson, whose memory is still fragrant in West Texas, one of the truest and sweetest spirits I have ever known. We hunted and fished together and enjoyed the open air of the Nueces Canyon with its clear streams, its pure air and its excellent people.

"I have mainly presented the rough side of that life. Remember that there was a soft side, too. There were Christian homes with Christian training. Refined men and women illustrated the power of the gospel and dispensed a hospitality that I have rarely seen surpassed.

"Over the space of 40-odd years I look back, and I see the forms and faces of dear friends passing before me. I forget the long rides through heat and cold, now facing the rain or else the fierce 'norther'. I only remember the dear friends and their kindness to the young preacher. I even recall the professional gamblers who were always courteous to me and were ever willing to aid any charity."