

The Quality of Mercy: Southern Baptists and Social Christianity, 1890-1920. Keith Harper, Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1996. 167 pp.

A Review

by R. Charles Blair, Adjunct History Professor
Mid-Continent College, Mayfield, Kentucky

Dr. Keith Harper has Kentucky roots, with a U. K. degree in History. His is Assistant Professor of Church History at The Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, Wake Forest, N. C. He was pastor of Central Baptist Church in Marion, Kentucky, in the 1970's.

The argument of his first published book is that Baptists in the southern states, after their recovery from "the late unpleasantness" and several years of what they called "destitution," both physical and religious, were more deeply involved in social work than anyone (themselves included) has realized. Even the Baptist churches often spoke against "the social gospel," as the Federal (now National) Council of Churches and leaders like Walter Rauschenbusch advocated.

Harper documents "an identifiable social ethic" among Southern Baptists around the turn of the century, addressing social problems with a distinctively southern accent. This means a stronger emphasis on local control and on evangelistic purpose in such actions.

The significant elements of this expression of social concern in the period were orphanages and schools. The story of Baptist child care in several states, including Kentucky, is told (though briefly). One notable and surprising omission is the Oneida school in Clay County, Kentucky, in the heart of "Appalachia." This work began in 1899, and still provides a world-renowned boarding school education.

Possibly the most interesting chapter is titled "Of Leopard Spots and Ethiopian Skin," with the sub-title "Southern Baptists and Racial Uplift." Again contrary to popular perception, Harper documents the concerns of Baptists in the south for the black community. In spite of divided views, The Quality of Mercy uses more than 20 of its less than 200 pages to show that many Southern Baptists were vitally interested in "racial uplift," and to show the special problems faced because of the division between the Baptists in the North and those in the South. These involved several issues, but came to a head over Northern "intrusions" (as white Southerners saw them) to assist blacks.

While it is of more interest to religious historians, and of special interest to Baptists, Harper's work fills a needed gap in specialized history, and makes a unique contribution to our historiography.

Boyd, Orma Lassiter. Recollections of Sedalia, Kentucky. Mayfield, KY, privately printed, 1999. 76 pages.

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All history, like all politics, is local in some sense, but most "local histories" are a stringing together of anecdotes and "what my friends and I did when."

Recollections is far more than that. It is a delightfully written collection of community, national, and world events as seen by an intelligent observer in a small town setting.

Orma Lassiter Boyd was born in the Sedalia community of Graves county, Kentucky, Sept. 19, 1887. One of three sisters, she knew the town and area intimately, and was interested in all of its activities. This 8 1/2" by 11" paperback is the ideal sort of "hometown history," because it sets local events in their wider context. When we realize that she has been collecting this information for nearly a century, and published it at the age of 103, still writing lucid prose and quite active, the volume becomes even more remarkable.

Since her husband, Byron P. Boyd, Sr., became Acting Postmaster at Sedalia in 1934, and was confirmed to full status in 1935, continuing until 1968 (the longest tenure of any Sedalia postmaster since the office was established in 1879), she begins with the story of the Post Office. The chapter on "Sedalia as a

Village" begins with a few settlers in the 1820's, so that we can follow the development of the newly formed Hickman County (later divided, with this area becoming Graves County) in the wider setting of national growth. Adequate (but not overdone) documentation gives us the flavor of these early settlers' lives.

As the community grew, businesses were established; names are given, and there are some rare photos. A separate chapter on education is lengthy and detailed. World Wars I and II are seen from the perspective of a small community looking out at its world. The 1917/18 flu epidemic and the Depression are detailed.

There is much on "The Great Flood of 1937," when Mayfield and the towns around were the refuge for those nearer the river. Yet another chapter on "the Sedalia Telephone Service" lets us listen in on the party line and feel at home. The chapter on community churches gives valuable documentation.

A brief chapter brings us from 1950 to 2000, "Into A New Century." This optimistic lady has been a real delight to know. As her pastor, I called her "Sister Faithful" (and I still do!), and encouraged her to write a history of the Sedalia Baptist Church, which was published in 1967 and which she has recently updated. It was a special joy to celebrate the 100th anniversary of that church on July 22, 1998, with Mrs. Boyd present and giving her perspective on the century.

This slim volume should take its place proudly among the collections of community histories in every library in our area.

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We regret to add to this review a word of loss. Mrs. Boyd's passing, on September 16, 2001, was marked by a note of celebration as her memorial services were held on what would have been her 104th birthday.

Our sincere sympathies are extended to her family.