

HOW BIBLESTA



CAME TO BE

Arthur Carlson, Jr.

Dr. Arthur Carlson, Jr. of Overland Park, Kansas, was a former resident of Humboldt and the originator of BIBLESTA. In 1998, Dr. Carlson kindly consented to write the complete history of how BIBLESTA came to be. It is presented here to educate those not familiar with it and to delight those who will remember it. To all, may it be an inspiration.

The idea for Biblesta came to me in 1957 while attending a cottage prayer meeting at the Herman Crawford residence. Our church, First Baptist, was planning a revival meeting, and everyone was praying that the attendance would be good and that many souls would be saved; however, I really did not expect that to happen.

At that time I was superintendent of our Sunday School, and I was very interested in Christian education and in the Good News of the Gospels. But I doubted that the people who should hear this Good News would attend. I thought there should be a better way to reach our audience. So I was not praying that night—I was listening and thinking.

I knew we could not follow the Apostle Paul's example and take it to the streets and the marketplace. Just a few days prior to this, as I drove down Bridge Street during the dinner hour, I saw a man standing on the sidewalk in front of the bank (then Humboldt National) with a microphone and a loudspeaker. I was curious, so I parked beside his panel truck and listened to him. He was preaching

a good sermon. Within five minutes, one of our policemen came and told the speaker to leave town. So I knew that would not work.

Suddenly, while on my knees at the prayer meeting that special night, it came to me in a flash! Why not a parade! Nobody would chase a parade out of town!

I started imagining. In my mind's eye, I saw an imaginary Bible story parade. I saw Adam and Eve in a beautiful garden. I saw Noah's ark. I saw Jacob's ladder with angels on it. I saw Moses carrying a stone slate. I saw the Exodus. I saw a manger scene. I saw a cross. I saw a crucifixion. I saw a resurrection. I saw Paul on the Damascus Road. All of these scenes I imagined. It was stunningly beautiful. Something like this should be shared! Then and there I decided the answer was a Bible Story Parade.

I got so excited I could barely contain myself! After the meeting was over, I went to Reverend Mason and told him about my Bible Story Parade idea. I could tell by the look on his face that he was completely bewildered. Then I went home and told my wife Kathleen about it. She thought it was a wonderful idea. I decided the Humboldt Ministerial Alliance should be a sponsor, so I asked Reverend Mason to present the idea to them. He did this, but they said the proposed project would cost too much, and it would be too much work; so they tabled the project indefinitely.

Then one day I went to the office of Dr. John L. Parkhurst to have a tooth pulled, and since he was then the president of the Humboldt Chamber of

Commerce, I presented my idea to him. He was non-committal, and I left his office feeling that I had made a fool of myself again.

A few months later the Humboldt Chamber of Commerce was having its annual banquet and business meeting, so I called Dr. Parkhurst to buy some tickets. He said, "Say, Art, some time ago you spoke to me about an idea you have for a Bible Story Parade. Why don't you present your idea to the membership tonight?"

So that is what I did. After the meeting nobody spoke to me about my proposal, except Mrs. Walter Wulf, Sr. She said, "Art, I liked your idea. That's the best idea that has ever come to Humboldt, but I'll predict that nothing will ever come of it."

But something did come of it. A couple of months later our phone rang at 9:00 p.m. It was Courtney Moles, the new president of the Humboldt Chamber of Commerce. He said he was at a board of directors meeting, and the board had decided to accept my proposed parade idea, and they wanted me to be the chairman of a committee to stage it. They had already set a date for it—only seven weeks away, on the first Saturday in October 1958. Since it was my idea, I felt obligated to accept.

As I hung up the phone, I told Kathleen what I had done. She said, "You know what this means, don't you?"

I responded, "I sure do. It means both of us will have to work really hard to make it a success. If it fails, I will become known as the biggest religious crackpot in the county, and we will be laughed out of town!"

The chamber of commerce gave me some really good people to help. The committee and the public closed ranks and went to work.

I thought it would be nice to have an Exodus entry in the parade, so I contacted Noel Jackson who was Sunday School Superintendent of the Maple Grove Church and tried to persuade him and his neighbors to put one together. He said, "Doc, that would be impossible. That would be chaos!"

I responded, "Perfect, that's *exactly* what we want—organized chaos!"

After considerable persuasion, I finally got him to agree, providing Clayton Peck, Sunday School Superintendent of the New York Valley Church of God, would help him in a cooperative project.

It was magnificent. There were about one hundred animals and one hundred costumed people in the entry. Children were thrilled to see all the farm animals!

The floats and walking entries in that original 1958 parade were very simple, but that merely added to its charm. The parade was a huge success. Before the day was over, plans for the 1959 parade were being made. The Kansas Highway Patrol estimated 10,000 people saw the parade. An estimated 3,000 stayed for the bean feed. There were twenty-three Bible Story floats, one Heritage float, and seven bands in the parade. Not counting the cost of the beans and pork, we spent \$128.00.

BIBLESTA almost died aborning due to a street dance the chamber of commerce planned as a co-event. Many citizens considered dancing to be a sin, and in special bad taste to be a co-event with a Bible Story celebration. Many of these objectors were members of my church, of which I was Sunday School Superintendent and also a deacon. I personally did not object to dancing, but I did think it would be in bad taste to be part of the Bible Story Parade celebration.

Consequently, I got caught in the crossfire while trying to be neutral. I went to my father-in-law, Amos Chancy—for whom I had great respect, for advice: should I resign the chairmanship of the Bible Story Parade or my two church offices? He advised me to keep all of my jobs and ride out the storm. So that is what I did. That proved to be good advice since in 1959 the chamber of commerce abandoned the dance.

Enthusiasm reigned for the 1959 parade! A contest was held to name the event. Up until then, it was called Bible Story Parade. Vern Howver's entry was Biblesta. So, from that time on, we called it BIBLESTA. The Kansas Highway Patrol estimated the 1959 crowd at 12,000. Not counting the cost of the beans and pork, we spent \$49.00.

After the Humboldt Chamber of Commerce's unpopular experience with the street dance, they decided they wanted out of the BIBLESTA project, so a plan was devised to form a BIBLESTA Committee from the city-at-large: The chamber of commerce would select two citizens and the churches would select

two; then the four of them would select a fifth person, and the group of five would select a chairman. This took the chamber of commerce completely out except for buying the beans and pork. Today, as in quite a number of years past, BIBLESTA fund-raising is absorbing those costs, and the chamber provides liability insurance for the event.

The BIBLESTA Committee drafted a rather stern set of guidelines to prevent the parade from ever becoming too commercialized or too religious. The Bible was expected to stand on its own feet without doctrinal interpretations; in other words, no preaching! We thought preaching would be too controversial.

In the 1958 and 1959 parades, we had Kansas National Guard troops marching along with the entries to preserve order just in case any trouble makers appeared. We didn't know what to expect. That sounds silly in retrospect.

The original concept of BIBLESTA was to be a combination of Bible Story and Heritage floats, to show all the good things that Christianity has inspired. In 1958, we had one Heritage float, but in 1959 we could not get any organization to agree to enter a Heritage float. Everyone wanted to enter a Bible Story float!

Life magazine paid a free-lance photographer, Joe Muecke, to cover the 1959 event, but *Life* decided that a bathtub race in a small town in Ohio would appeal to its readers more.

On the first Saturday in October 1959, Charles Hammer, a reporter from the *Kansas City Star*, was on his way to Oklahoma to cover a college football game. When he tried to drive through Humboldt at 10:00 a.m., he couldn't. The

streets were roped off and a crowd was forming. He inquired, "What's going on?" He found out what was going on and decided to cover BIBLESTA instead of the football game.

As a result, Lassman's "Garden of Eden" float was the headline and leading front-page picture the following morning in the *Kansas City Star*.

The 1959 parade almost got rained out. It poured right up to parade time, then stopped.

One float was built in a garage and ended up being too big for the door, so the east wall of the garage had to be torn down to get the float out.

The 1960 parade had an attendance of 20,000. The cost was \$1,200, not counting beans.

Noel Jackson's sheep dog, Bufer, was getting old and was too tired to herd sheep, so I gave him hormones and vitamins to perk him up. He responded really well; and when Noel's sheep took off down the alley, Bufer went to get them and chased them back to Bridge Street.

Joseph and Mary had donkey trouble. They borrowed their donkey from a traveling donkey baseball team. The first one was too mean for Mary to ride, so they got a replacement. The replacement sat down on the pavement every time they said, "Giddy-up." Then they got yet another replacement, and it bucked Mary off, so Mary had to walk and lead her donkey with a rope.

Getting BIBLESTA off to a good start was one of the best experiences I have ever had. It reminds me of raising a child: First you nurture him, then you wean him, then you coach him and train him; finally, you send him out into the world to make his own mark. Then, all of a sudden, the “kid” is forty-one years old, and you are really proud of him. There was no reason for you to worry at all. But you did. So did I, but I didn’t need to.

I try to be very humble about my part in this adventure. I believe that God was, and is, leading the people of Humboldt, and God deserves credit for the idea—not me. The idea came as an answer to prayers sent up at that prayer meeting.

It is so reassuring to watch generations of young people take over the leadership of BIBLESTA! Every year the parade gets better, and the Gospel music makes people clap their hands and stomp their feet! Tremendous! Keep it up!

Arthur Carlson, Jr.

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