

Desperate Struggle

POPULARITY OF SUNDAY SCHOOL EBBS

By Russell Chandler
Times Religious Writer

William H. Willimon will never forget the Sunday when his Sunday school teacher told the story about Joseph being thrown into the pit by his jealous brothers. Willimon "finally gave Stanley Starnes what he deser-

classes in 290,000 churches and synagogues each week; 96 percent of all Protestant congregations have Sunday or Sabbath schools. And although Sunday school often is considered only an educational agency for children, it is also the nation's latest adult education program.

Despite the im-

Sunday School Is In A Desperate Struggle For Its Very Existence

ved" and pushed him into the radiator at the back of the Sunday school gym.

Stanley had to be carried away screaming and bleeding to the hospital emergency room.

And Miss Lewis went on with the lesson.

"Now William," she said, opening her bible, "you know what Joseph's brothers felt like. They had a little brother like Stanley, and they did to him what you would like to do to Stanley. But God loved them. And God loves you — even if you did push Stanley into the radiator."

Looking Back

Willimon, who now teaches at Duke University's divinity school, is one of tens of millions of adult Americans who look back to their Sunday school days as important shapers — sometimes misshapers — of their beliefs and values.

Sunday School:

Scorned as "the most wasted hour of the week" by Life magazine. Derided as "Mickey Mouse stuff" — superficial and unsophisticated. Lauded as the civilizer of the nation. Hailed as the progenitor of the American public school and library systems.

Observing its bicentennial this year, the Sunday school movement is the nation's biggest volunteer enterprise. A total of 32.6 million youths and adults attend

tial for church growth through the evangelization and instruction of children. Adapting the idea to a church-sponsored Sunday school, he exported it to America.

But the movement had a rough beginning in the States, too.

In 1787, a Methodist preacher in Charleston, S.C., was drenched with water "for the benefit of the African children of that vicinity."

New England was no better. An old pastor shook his ivory-headed cane at a young girl in Connecticut who had assembled a little Sunday School and shouted: "You imps of Satan, doing the devil's work!"

Churches showed increased interest in Sunday Schools by the early 19th Century. There was a general change from paid to volunteer teachers. And the movement gained middle-class respectability.

Bible Was Textbook

"The Sunday School is in a desperate struggle for its very existence." The Sunday School movement was not born without a struggle.

Two hundred years ago, a newspaper publisher-philanthropist named Robert Raikes hired four women — paying them a shilling a day — to teach rowdy street children in Gloucester, England, some manners and how to read and write. The Bible was a primary textbook.

But Raikes' efforts to help the "ragamuffins" with his Sunday Schools were soundly criticized by the press and even by churchmen who said they were an "abomination" and a violation of the Sabbath.

Even the Archbishop of Canterbury and the British parliament tried to suppress the budding movement.

One clergyman came to Raikes' defense. A Methodist named John Wesley saw the poten-

Poor Scrubbed Up

"The poor, in order to prove they were as good as anyone else, scrubbed up, dressed up and presented themselves on Sunday mornings," Robert Lynn and Elliott Wright wrote in "The Big Little School," the definitive history of the movement.

The first 60 years of this century was the "Golden Age" for American Sunday Schools: They were established at a record pace and churches, too, enjoyed unprecedented growth.

By the late 1960s although few noticed, many Sunday Schools gradually changed their focus and became preoccupied with organizational survival. Growth slackened, then stopped.

And decline set in.

'Will Become Extinct'

"In fact, if the decline... continues at the rate it has... in two generations the Sunday School, as we know it, will become extinct," Arn warns.

Research shows that Sunday School enrollment in every Protestant denomination, in proportion to total church membership, is steadily declining.



TWO EMPLOYEES OF THE DUNES HOTEL & COUNTRY CLUB recently won the employee of the month award for outstanding performance on the job. Pictured are recipients, Zennomia Edwards of valet service, left, and Katherine Roberts of food and beverage control. Pictured center is John Bogardus, Dunes Vice President and General Manager, presenting them each a \$100 U.S. Saving Bond and certificate of appreciation on behalf of the Dunes management.

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