

A SMALL MIRACLE: “THANKSGIVING TOGETHER”

From 1907 in Dallas to 2000 International Year of Thanksgiving

BY PETER P. STEWART

A world seed was planted on Elm Street in Dallas in 1907. Dr. William H. Greenburg, who had become rabbi of Temple Emanu-El in 1901, had a simple question for his fellow clergy: “Since we only have one common religious holiday, why don’t we celebrate it, *together*?” Rabbi Greenburg felt that citizens of all creeds and nationalities should gather to give thanks “as the children of God at least on one occasion during the year.” His invitation to join in the first “People’s Thanksgiving Service” may have drawn thoughtful looks, but a tradition was born.

While Dallas residents had much to be thankful for in 1907, they did the unusual thing—they expressed it. The city had survived the financial recession of the 1890s to emerge as the banking and insurance center for the Southwest and the world’s leading market for cotton gin machinery. From about 42,000 in 1900, its population was increasing rapidly, and civic leaders had recently organized the “150,000 Club,” aimed at reaching that goal by 1910. The day before Thanksgiving, the local papers reported that the planned observance “has struck a popular chord.” It would have a new feature: “people of all creeds are urged to attend . . . this is unique.”

Hundreds of people packed the Bush Temple of Music on Elm Street on Thanksgiving Day, Thursday, November 28, 1907, and hundreds more were turned away, unable even



William H. Greenburg

to get standing room. Speakers included Baptist, Christian, Episcopal, Jewish, Methodist, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, and Unitarian clergy. Standing in front of a banner inscribed, “Have we not all one Father?”, Rabbi Greenburg reminded his audience, “We ought to be thankful today that we are children of forefathers of deep religious conviction and unbounded faith.” Father James M. Hayes of Sacred Heart Cathedral declared, “The time has gone when men hate

each other because they differ in belief. Religion is naught but love, because God is love.” And Dr. J. Frank Smith of Central Presbyterian, in the principal address, stated, “You see on this rostrum a Catholic beside a Unitarian and a Methodist beside a Jew, and there is no spitting of fire.”²

The first People’s Thanksgiving Service was such a success that it became an annual event. An especially large crowd of 4,500 people assembled at the Fair Park coliseum on Thanksgiving Day in 1918 to celebrate the end of World War I.³ As residents of a relatively young city that was growing and prospering, Dallasites clearly felt drawn to express their gratitude in a common forum on a holiday traditionally devoted to thanksgiving.

However, the next year only a few hundred gathered for the service at City Hall auditorium.⁴ Dr. Greenburg had recently left Dallas to take up duties in New York, and without his leadership, the annual thanksgiving services fell into



The Bush Temple of Music, located on Elm Street between Griffin and North Akard, was the site of the first "People's Thanksgiving Service" in 1907.

abeyance. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, individual denominations got together for what they called "union services"—the Methodists in one location, the Presbyterians in another, for instance—but there were no citywide services.⁵ Dr. Greenburg's successor, Dr. David Lefkowitz, did invite representatives of South Dallas congregations to join him at Temple Emanu-El (then located on South Boulevard) for a service in 1934, but this initiative failed to spread.⁶

As Dallas approached its one-hundredth anniversary in 1941, civic leaders began planning a special Thanksgiving service. Held in the six-year-old Hall of State at Fair Park, this centennial Thanksgiving featured an impressive array of dignitaries. George Bannerman Dealey, publisher of *The Dallas Morning News* and president

of the Dallas Historical Society, reminded the audience that the anniversary "calls the citizens to Thanksgiving for the blessings of the century that is done, but challenges them . . . to those tasks which are . . . the high privilege of citizens of no means city." Herbert Marcus, president of the Dallas Anniversary Association, noted "the unending quest for the abundant life and of the persistence of the unconquerable spirit of pioneers." The Dallas Centennial Award poem, "Articulate," by Lexie Dean Robertson, challenged, "Build a dream bigger than Dallas. Make a song for all the world to sing."⁷

The bombing of Pearl Harbor and America's entry into World War II only a few weeks after the service at the Hall of State renewed the spirit of cooperation and dedication among all Americans and led to a revival of the annual interfaith Thanksgiving services in Dallas. On Thanksgiving Day 1942, a large audience filled the Palace theater to join in song and prayer. Rabbi Lefkowitz admitted that it was hard to find reasons for thanksgiving during war, but "we have thousands of blessings, many of them so common they are seldom noted . . . our homes . . . our children . . . the glories of sunrise." Dr. George Truett, the revered pastor of First Baptist Church, reminded his audience that "every day should be Thanksgiving, the crowning habit of every life."⁸

In the years after World War II, as the nation experienced the Cold War, the Berlin Wall, and the Korean War, Dallas continued to observe Thanksgiving with an annual celebration at a downtown theater. In 1957 about 1,500 people gathered at the Majestic Theater for the sixteenth continuous annual Community Thanksgiving Day Celebration, sponsored by the National Conference of Christians and Jews. One of the speakers, Rabbi Hillel E. Silverman, reminded his listeners that "Thanksgiving begins in the heart, not on the table. It is comparatively easy to observe the pleasantries of the Thanksgiving Festival . . . It is far more complex to feel the spirit of Thanksgiving."⁹ But as residential suburbs spread farther from downtown, and

afternoon football games competed for audiences, civic leaders found it increasingly difficult to attract crowds to the downtown service. The 1957 service, held fifty years after Rabbi Greenburg's initial invitation, was the last.

But in 1961 entirely new thanksgiving pioneers asked a completely different question: "Could Thanksgiving become the center of an American city?" Throughout history, the temple had always been at the crossroads, but now, in America, with many religions and cultures, could

Thanksgiving, the nation's oldest and most beloved tradition, honor God for all people? To show the real power of the word, they called it "Thanks-Giving Square."

The "new Dallas" downtown was being formed by freeway planning in the early 1960s. Marvin Springer, the City Engineer, pointed out to Peter Stewart that the triangle of land bounded by Akard, Ervay, and Pacific, was now the "center acre" of Dallas. Although unaware then of the Dallas tradition dating to 1907,

As president of the Dallas Historical Society, George Bannerman Dooley was a featured speaker at the Thanksgiving service at the Hall of State on November 23, 1941, commemorating the one-hundredth anniversary of the founding of Dallas.



Stewart and civic leaders John Stemmons, Julius Schepps, and Joe Neuhoff chartered the Thanksgiving Square Foundation in 1964 to develop the property as a crossroads where people of all cultures and faiths could gather to give thanks. Their basic document of purpose and vision stated, "a city's great aspiration should be apparent at its center. Thanksgiving to God is America's most ancient and enduring tradition." The Chamber of Commerce in November 1965 printed it as a full page with praying hands.

The idea of Thanksgiving coming alive at the center of the city stimulated minds and spirits. To find out the depth of interest, a series of "Thanksgiving Roundtables" was held. Dr. Albert Outler of Duke, Yale, and SMU advised Thanksgiving seekers to "Go ask the smartest people in the world." Later roundtables in London, Auckland, Birmingham, Oxford, Vancouver, Buenos Aires, Hong Kong, Nanjing, and Bangalore demonstrated that great minds everywhere seemed instantly to grasp the concept of Thanksgiving. When given the word, John Templeton, one of the world's leading financial figures, instantly replied, "Oh, that's the key to all doors!" So many ideas were generated by Dallas citizens of all walks of life that in 1968 they were assembled in a booklet edited by Stewart entitled, "The Spirit of Thanksgiving—Testimony of the People."

Meanwhile, in December 1968, the triangular property was finally assembled in coordination with the Dallas Park Board. Former Mayor R. L. Thornton, head of the Mercantile National Bank, was an early commercial booster, with Tom Suggs, President of the Missouri Pacific Railroad; W. W. Lynch of Texas Power & Light; Dow Hamm of Atlantic Richfield; James Aston and Karl Hoblitzelle of Republic Bank and many others.

The goal became to build what America lacked, a worthy Thanksgiving national shrine for 1976, America's Bicentennial. Great architecture was needed to convey the feelings of gratitude, praise, and thanksgiving for 200 years. Finally Philip Johnson, noted for his symbolic

architecture, was chosen. The first chairmen of the board of development were James J. Ling, head of Ling-Tempco-Vought, and civic leader Margaret McDermott.

On May 17, 1972, the clearance for Thanksgiving Square began with Isaiah 40: "Clear ye the way of the Lord." The Reverend I. B. Loud recited the 100th Psalm, and the Pulley Bone restaurant on the west corner was demolished.

With the land assembled, the next goal was to raise funds to build the chapel. John Stemmons suggested that insurance executive Carr P. Collins could provide the motive power if he would agree to chair the campaign. He did, and nearly 800 contributors made it successful. The chapel was dedicated in 1976, and the Garden of Thanksgiving was opened in 1977.

Meanwhile, the Foundation's research into the 200-year-old Thanksgiving tradition pointed to the nation's need for a suitable home for American Thanksgiving. Influenced by cabinet-level advisor Anne Armstrong of Texas, in 1974 President Gerald Ford signed a Thanksgiving Proclamation for school children and declared Thanks-Giving Square "a major national shrine." He also established "the Presidential Collection" of Thanksgiving Proclamations at Thanks-Giving Square.¹⁰ Five years later, Mrs. Armstrong, as president of the National Thanksgiving Commission, persuaded President Ronald Reagan to set a fixed date in May for the National Day of Prayer, restoring the dates originally appointed by the Continental Congress. Presidential support continued in 1991, when George Bush dedicated the "Wall of Presidential Thanksgivings" at Thanks-Giving Square, displaying for the first time the prayers and thanksgiving words of U.S. Presidents since 1789. President Bush called the site "a symbol and a home for America's most beloved tradition."¹¹

Thanks-Giving Square had started its world outreach in 1973, when Dr. Albert Outler of SMU's Perkins School of Theology asked Raimon Panikkar of Spain and India and Masao Takanaka of Japan to represent Eastern and Western religions in determining "Is Thanks-

giving universal?" As early as 1975 the United Nations was calling on Thanks-Giving Square to learn the meaning of the National Day of Prayer in the United States, since young staff members at the U.N. wanted to have their own National Day of Prayer celebration at the organization's New York headquarters.

In September 1977, Thanks-Giving Square opened the Hall of World Thanksgiving with Robert Muller, Assistant Secretary-General of the U.N., in attendance. In 1981 Thanks-Giving Square hosted the First Convocation of World Thanksgiving. Visiting dignitary Franz Cardinal Konig, Archbishop of Vienna, suggested an annual Declaration of World Thanksgiving to be signed by twelve representatives of differing reli-

gious traditions. It was sent out on a trial basis, and with the Dalai Lama as the first signer, it became an increasingly popular annual declaration of faith, with twelve new signers each year. The total now reaches 200. The Dalai Lama spoke at the Second Convocation in 1984, and the Third Convocation in 1989 featured two distinguished guests, the Rt. Rev. Robert A. K. Runcie, Archbishop of Canterbury, and Sir John Templeton.

As Dallas approached its 150th anniversary in 1991, the Thanks-Giving Square Foundation recalled the celebration at the Hall of State in 1941 and, with the help of other civic organizations, suggested the "Jubilee" thanksgiving concept (from Leviticus). Mayor Annette Strauss was immediately enthusiastic and asked Bob Lane, Chairman of the First Republic Corporation, to be overall chair. Jubilee Dallas was launched November 1, 1991, in the Garden of Thanksgiving with singers, dancers, and speakers. A "Prayer for the City," composed by religious leaders representing the Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim faiths, thanked God for His blessings on the community and asked His favor "on our efforts to look at ourselves, to take pride in what has been accomplished, to make right that which has been wrong about our community, and to fashion a future which is bright for those who are here, and for those yet to come."¹²

Thanks-Giving Square continued to expand its educational programs and curricula for all ages, especially a Thanksgiving high school program bringing together the city's outstanding juniors and seniors with civic leaders, and bringing to the Square national and world speakers. A consortium of nine Texas universities and colleges has discussed deeper Thanksgiving studies to explore gratitude in all religions, cultures, arts, and sciences. Thanks-Giving Square also expanded its design to three acres when the DART transit tracks were laid along Pacific and Bryan adjacent to the Square. Architect Philip Johnson added three great fifteen-ton monoliths, each with thanksgiving words of Texas, the

The golden Ring of Thanks stands at one end of Thanks-Giving Square.



United States, and the world. Each monolith displays four historic Thanksgiving quotations from such individuals as Coronado (1541), Sam Houston (1842), and Milton Curry (former president of Bishop College).

Today a visitor's pilgrimage through Thanksgiving Square starts with the great Thanksgiving Stone under the bell tower, where three bronze Thanksgiving Bells ring out, echoing through the city. Walking up the Path of Life to the great mosaic of the Golden Rule leads one to the ceremonial entry through the golden Ring of Thanks and into the physical pleasures of the trees and fountains of the Garden of Gratitude and into the Center Court of Praise. The Hall of Thanksgiving, just off the courtyard beneath the chapel, stimulates the mind with the personal dynamics of Thanksgiving with Thanksgiving traditions from every continent and every age. Then the visitor passes up over the bridge to the soaring white marble aggregate Chapel of Thanksgiving with its dramatic spiral of life stained glass ceiling, "the Glory Window," which has been adopted by the United Nations as the symbol for its "2000 International Year of Thanksgiving."

That powerful world Thanksgiving concept began in Dallas with the Thanksgiving World Advisors—five distinguished representatives of Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim faiths—who proposed that the United Nations declare a world year of Thanksgiving for 2000. The General Assembly gave its approval in 1997. The Thanksgiving World Assembly in Dallas in 1999 was followed by meetings in Paris and the Vatican and then with the President of the U.N. General Assembly, at which the 2000 Thanksgiving Spiral of Life stamp was officially unveiled.

As Sir John Templeton has observed, "The next century, the twenty-first, will be the century of Thanksgiving—a great world movement, a

movement of overwhelming Thanksgiving which can serve to unite and stimulate all future civilizations." A great legacy, a world seed, "thanksgiving together," was planted in fertile Texas soil in 1907 and has grown in hearts and minds and actions for nearly a hundred years. From one inspiring afternoon a year in Dallas, the idea of "Thanksgiving together" has expanded to be honored all day, every day at the center of the city and a continent. Thanksgiving Square has become home base for our 200-year-old national tradition and a world base for the continuing exploration of Thanksgiving and its power to heal and unify.

The world seed—the "small miracle" of the "thanksgiving together" on Elm Street in 1907—keeps on branching worldwide.

¹ Gerry Cristol, *A Light in the Prairie: Temple Emanu-El of Dallas 1872-1997* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1998), 66, citing Greenburg's autobiography.

² *The Dallas Morning News*, November 29, 1907; *Dallas Times Herald*, November 29, 1907.

³ *The Dallas Morning News*, November 29, 1918.

⁴ *Ibid.*, November 28, 1919.

⁵ See, for example, *ibid.*, November 26, 1920; November 25, 1921, November 30, 1923, November 27, 1931; and November 27, 1936.

⁶ *Ibid.*, November 29, 1934.

⁷ *Ibid.*, November 24, 1941. See also program, "A Service of Thanksgiving and Dedication," Dallas Historical Society Archives.

⁸ *The Dallas Morning News*, November 27, 1942.

⁹ *Ibid.*, November 29, 1957.

¹⁰ Gerald R. Ford, "To the Citizens of Dallas from the President of the United States," November 11, 1974.

¹¹ Remarks at dedication ceremony, November 1, 1991.

¹² Program for Opening Ceremony, Jubilee Dallas, November 1, 1991.