

JOSEPH CARDEN'S "MOST PERFECT" CHURCH

By Sally M. Gray*

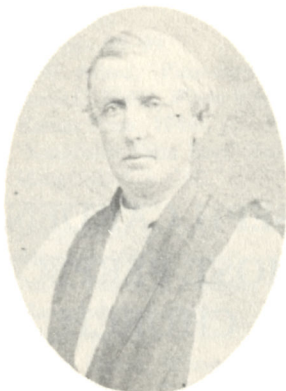
Joseph Carden

By no stretch of imagination could the town of Ardmore have been considered a garden spot in the year 1893. Inaccessible at times over deep-rutted trails, its primary thoroughfare stood hub-deep in mud during the rainy season, alternating with ankle-deep dust in dry months. Livestock had undisputed right-of-way on the town's main street and hogs sought relief from the elements under board platforms erected for the convenience of customers in front of the scattered business establishments. It was not uncommon for pedestrians to receive a liberal spattering of mud and water when their footsteps startled the swine in these luxurious wallows.

A certain disregard for sanitation prevailed, as deplored on the front page of the local newspaper: "Parties complain to the *Daily Ardmoreite* every day of dead animals left near their residences. There is a carcass of a skinned cow on S. Waco street and it has been left there to disturb the citizens for two days. It is surrounded with hogs, dogs and buzzards."¹

Into this primitive community, that year, the cultured, refined Rt. Reverend Francis Key Brooke, first Episcopal bishop to Oklahoma and Indian territories, ventured for his initial visitation. His flock was small,

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The Rt. Rev. Francis Key Brooke, first Episcopal bishop to Oklahoma and Indian territories (Courtesy of Sally Gray).

times were hard, and the community was more inclined toward roistering than religion.

Nevertheless, with a nucleus of three communicants, Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Golledge and Captain John S. Hammer, he set about establishing a mission church. On December 22, 1894, St. Philip's was organized and an executive committee chosen. They were: J. W. Golledge, John S. Hammer, Edwin Locket, John McNeish, George W. Wilhelm, R. S. Dennie and E. S. Edwards. For some time, services were conducted in private homes, public buildings, and other churches.

Through the generosity of Richard McLish, a wealthy Chickasaw landowner, a plot of land was obtained for the church. On July 12, 1896, Bishop Brooke consecrated St. Philip's first church, a small, white frame structure which was to serve the parish for many years to come.

If the tiny church had inconveniences, they were not unique for the time. Kerosene lamps were used for illumination; for fuel, coal or wood were used. There were no funds for janitorial services, so various members conducted a rather haphazard campaign of sweeping, dusting, and caring for lamps and stoves.

In those lean days following the depression of 1893, even these essential items were scarce. Early reminiscences record that Mrs. Golledge, who always arrived early for services, frequently carried kindling wood in her buggy and sometimes started the fires in the big wood-burning stoves.²

By July, 1907, the mission had become a parish with eighty-five communicants and gradual improvements were being made in the building itself. After 1909, through efforts of members who sponsored a subscription contest in the *Morning Democrat*, music was provided by a pump organ, with young boys of the parish assigned the chore of providing the muscle

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When St. Philip's Church was founded, Ardmore was a frontier town in the western region of the Chickasaw Nation (Oklahoma Historical Society).

work. Resulting chords were sometimes less than melodious, the organ's volume rising and falling in direct relation to the efforts of the pumpers.³

The small Gothic structure served the needs of St. Philip's parishioners and provided a location for various community activities. A room was added to the south of the original building and was utilized for private and public school groups, one of the first Boy Scout troops organized in Oklahoma, amateur theatricals, kindergarten programs, a meeting place for civic clubs, and a precinct voting place. Over the years, it became a landmark of some importance to the townspeople of Ardmore, especially members of St. Philip's church.

Then, the Reverend Joseph Carden was called as rector to the parish, and his flock immediately discovered him to be an energetic, enthusiastic, and positive thinking man with a bulldog tenacity. He was generous to a fault, sometimes outspoken to the same degree, and a tireless worker.

Two years earlier, Carden had departed Texas with the words of his bishop ringing in his ears, ". . . I am getting to be an old man now and I revolt at the operations of this ceaseless law of change," a sentiment in no way shared by the younger man. He had been in Ardmore but a short while when the winds of change evidenced themselves in small, subtle ways.⁴

Carden viewed the modest little church with considerably less sentiment than did his parishioners. In a letter to his new bishop shortly after his

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arrival, he commented rather caustically, “. . . the church at Ardmore is a hen coop.”⁵

At the request of Bishop Thurston, Carden had assumed the duties of editing and publishing the official church organ, *The Oklahoma Churchman*, a task which must have sorely tried the good man's patience. In addition to the workload that it represented, the editor's letters to his superior ranged in content from veiled hints in the beginning to desperate pleas at the end pleading for financial relief in the enterprise which he had been persuaded to undertake. The bishop's letters, in reply, conveyed a peculiarly cavalier attitude toward the disbursement of the rector's personal funds, a disbursement which at times placed the poor man in financial difficulties.

Nevertheless, it is this publication that provides a detailed account of the construction of St. Philip's second and present church building. Carden's monthly columns were devoted to progress reports of infinitesimal degree, reports which must have bored his readers throughout the state but which preserved records of the project which otherwise would have been lost.

In March of 1925, the new rector's subtle campaign was quietly launched in the pages of the Episcopal publication when he wrote, “Oil's looking up. If it looks up much more, we are going to gently (?) hint to our people that the time has come to build a real church here at Ardmore.”⁶

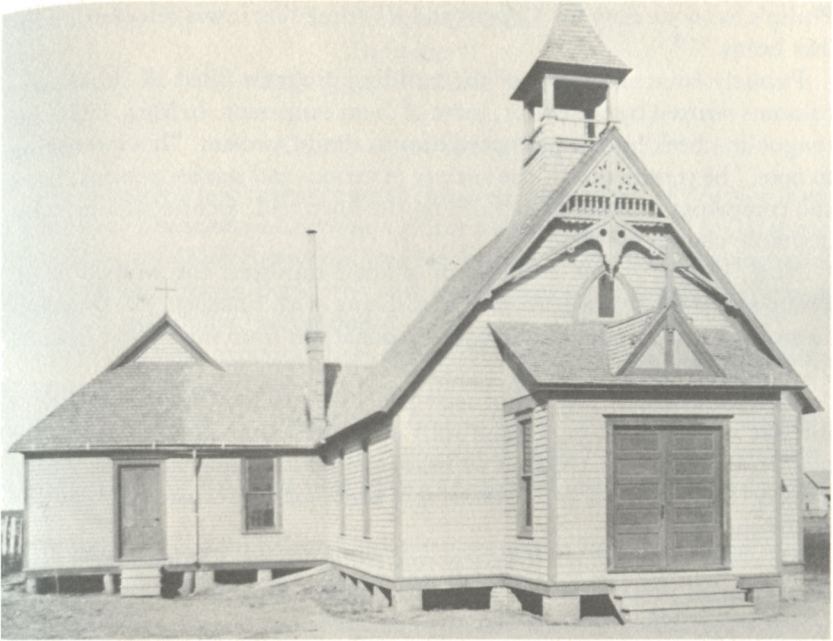
Throughout the spring and summer, the subject did not come up again. Then, in November, the editor informed his readers of an invitation. He wrote:

The rector, wardens and vestry and congregation of St. Philip's Episcopal Church, Ardmore, accept with pleasure the invitation of the Methodist Church of Ardmore to be present and unite with them in the opening service of the new and wonderful church which is nearing completion. . . . the rector of St. Philip's would beg leave to add that he hopes his congregation will be inoculated with a tithe of faith, courage and persistence and energy that have made so great a work arise so that there may arise on the south side of the park, an Episcopal church which will be an ornament to our fair city and a suitable and adequate expression of faith and hope of the mother of English-speaking Christianity.⁷

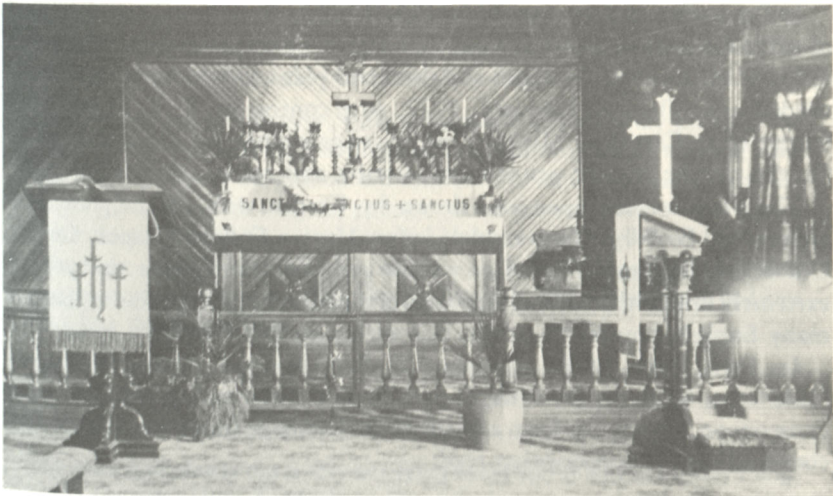
At this point, it became difficult for his congregation to ignore Carden's thinly veiled hints. In February, 1926, he was able to report an acceptable response, “The guild reports \$300 in the bank, the beginning of a new church building fund.”⁸

Wasting no time, in April of 1926 plans for the ambitious undertaking surfaced when Mr. Carden wrote, “On the fifth Sunday in Lent in place of a sermon, our minister stated that the time had come to build a new church. He offered four options to subscribers. . . . this little shack we call St.

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Original St. Philip's Church, built in 1896 (Courtesy of Sally Gray).



Interior of the original church (Courtesy of Sally Gray).

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Philip's has done duty for 32 years and it is time that it was relegated to the 'has beens.'"⁹

Publicly launched, news of the building program filled all subsequent columns written by the editor, most of them exuberant. In May, 1926, his tongue-in-cheek humor prompted him to a mild sarcasm. "It's interesting to note," he commented, "the anxiety of various and sundry persons, firms and companies to assist us in building the finest and, architecturally, most desirable church on earth."¹⁰

Now, caught in the enthusiasm of their minister, the women of St. Philip's vied for the opportunity of assisting with finances. *The Oklahoma Churchman* made frequent references to donations from the Service League, St. Philip's Guild, and other organizations within the church.

"Service League," the editor stated in June, 1926, "has centered their interest and affection on a beautifully appointed altar and chancel for the new St. Philip's. . . . the altar we have in mind is a duplicate of the altar of Trinity Church, Houston, Texas. It is of white marble, chaste and beautiful in design."¹¹

No detail was too small to be reported to his readers. Carden's preoccupation with his project seemed to amount almost to an obsession, a feeling which was clarified through the usual channel, his monthly column. "We have not thought of much else for four months, waking or sleeping," he told his readers. ". . . this will probably be our last constructive work in the ministry as we have passed our 67th birthday and we want it to crown the whole, hence our pre-occupation, study and carefulness."¹²

In December of that year, bids began coming in from contractors, and much to the rector's consternation, they were higher than expected. Regretfully, he eliminated the organ and disclosed plans to borrow a part of the needed sum. Then, in February, 1927, with contractor, T. E. Snelson, he journeyed to Carthage, Missouri, to investigate stone for the new edifice. On the trip he secured prices from quarries and made a final selection.

The plan decided upon and drawn by Carden with the help of local architect J. B. White, was modeled after Merton College Chapel, Oxford University, England. The design was not perpendicular Gothic, and yet not extremely low Gothic. It had sidewalls of medium height similar to those of many English country churches, but with a steeper roof than most.

In April, with the Rt. Reverend E. Cecil Seaman, Acting Bishop of Oklahoma, on hand, St. Philip's parishioners witnessed the laying of the cornerstone, a stone cut from a block of the Carthage limestone selected for construction. The inscription read:

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St. Philip's Church
(Episcopal)
Rev. Joseph Carden, rector
X
Church organized, 1896

Deposited in a lead casket beneath the stone were copies of *The New York Churchman*, *The Southern Churchman*, three recent numbers of *The Oklahoma Churchman*, the *Daily Ardmoreite*, and the *Ardmore Daily Press*. Also included were a revised Prayer Book, the authorized hymnal, a nickle, a dime, a quarter, a half dollar, and a dollar.

Gifts continued to pour in from the women of the church. Included were a memorial to Bishop Brooke, a rose window to be installed high above the altar, a stained glass rendition of the Ascension for the great north window, and the remaining stained glass windows, all made possible by personal sponsorship. The windows were to be produced by the Kansas City Stained Glass Works.

A small flaw marred Joseph Carden's happiness in June, 1927, and as was his habit, he duly reported the incident in his column:¹³

From the very beginning of the work, things went awry. We had seven masons and cutters, each with a helper. One did a day's work every day. He laid as much wall as the other three. The rest loafed and their helpers loafed. Our daily wage was about \$135 and it cost us \$1.35 per surface foot to lay the wall.

The parson protested frequently but got no results. Finally on May 26, he ordered the contractor to discharge a mason and a stone cutter that night. The next morning he ordered the contractor to discharge two more men at noon.

The foreman became abusive, then vituperative and suddenly knocked the parson in the face, knocking off his glasses and followed it with a second blow which felled him to the ground and continued to rain blows on his face and head with kicks to his body for perhaps two or three minutes until a decent stone mason came to his aid and ran the brute away. The parson's face was a pulp—the doctor counted 23 contusions. . . . he was groggy and nauseated and the work stopped until the following Monday. The parson was in bed four days in a dazed condition.

Now we have one stone cutter and two masons and our daily wage is \$54 and we are getting more work done than when we had four masons and three cutters.

The work goes slowly but is very satisfying to the eye. It will be a lovely thing, architecturally, when finished.

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St. Philip's Church as designed and constructed by Joseph Carden (Courtesy of Sally Gray).

By October, interior work was in progress, much to the delight of St. Philip's rector. "The masons have finished the walls and are now laying the stone floor of the nave—piggly, wiggly. The chaste and lovely stone altar is in place and the chancel floor laid. After three failures, we secured the services of a real boss carpenter and his work is evident in the wonderful trussed and panelled ceiling."¹⁴

It was this ceiling that proved the greatest challenge in the construction. The architect could find no way to tie the roofing timbers over the choir into the framework of the main structure. Carden spent his summer vacation in Evergreen, Colorado, at the Episcopal center, a popular gathering spot for ministers. While attending Sunday morning service, he looked up at the roof and there was the answer to his architectural problem, neatly tied together.

In every way, the structure was pleasing to St. Philip's rector, a senti-

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This interior view illustrates the time and care given to the construction of the "most perfect" church (Courtesy of Sally Gray).

ment he readily expressed. "We have no hesitation," he told his readers in October, "in declaring that the church is the most unique and architectural-ly most correct and beautiful building in Oklahoma. It is an architectural Gothic gem, of purest ray supreme."¹⁵

In a letter to his bishop he expressed himself even more eloquently, "Every time I enter the new church, my soul seems lifted to our Heavenly Father. It humbles me that he has used me to build such a lovely temple. Praise His Holy Name!"¹⁶

With his labor of love drawing to a close, he made one final report on the state of his church in December, 1927, when he wrote: ". . . for ten months this parson has been on the building job. He knows the name of every stone in the building and there are approximately 30,000 pieces, each of them cut by hand and laid in honest cement mortar. . . . the furniture has arrived. It is being assembled."¹⁷

It is certain that Christmas, 1927, was the happiest holiday season of Joseph Carden's life. With his church completed, he conducted the traditional midnight service on Christmas eve, followed by a celebration of the Holy Eucharist on Christmas morning.

But his joy was shortlived. In October, 1929, *The Oklahoma Churchman* carried the name of a new editor on its masthead and included the following announcement inside its pages:

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Rev. Joseph Carden, rector of St. Philip's church Ardmore, resigned his parish on Aug. 1, 1929, and retired from active ministry. Mr. Carden came to Oklahoma under Bishop Thurston Oct. 1, 1923. He began his ministry in the state as Archdeacon of Central Oklahoma. Later on, he was called to be rector at St. Philip's. Practically every member of the church knew him through his work as editor and publisher of the Oklahoma Churchman. He was an examining chaplain to Bishop Thurston and also to Bishop Casady.

But as he himself has repeatedly said, the erection of St. Philip's Church, the most perfect church building in the state, was the climax and crown of his ministry.¹⁸

Joseph Carden returned to his home state of Massachusetts after leaving his beloved church in Ardmore. In Springfield he ended his days in a room surrounded by photographs of his "most perfect church."

ENDNOTES

*Sally M. Gray is a free-lance writer from Ardmore. She is a parishioner of St. Philip's Church, and is currently engaged in researching the history of the church.

¹ *Daily Ardmoreite* (Ardmore, Oklahoma), November 23, 1893.

² Interview, Miss Gladys Scivally, Tulsa, Oklahoma, granddaughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. W. Gollidge, November 25, 1978.

³ Correspondence from Robert M. Sayre, Rockport, Texas, August 20, 1978.

⁴ Bishop G. H. Kinsolving to Joseph Carden, September 29, 1923.

⁵ Carden to Rt. Rev. E. C. Seaman, January 22, 1926.

⁶ *The Oklahoma Churchman*, March, 1925.

⁷ *Ibid.*, November, 1925.

⁸ *Ibid.*, February, 1926.

⁹ *Ibid.*, April, 1926.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, May, 1926.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, June, 1926.

¹² *Ibid.*, October, 1926.

¹³ *Ibid.*, June, 1927.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, October, 1927.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Carden to Bishop Thomas Casady, October 4, 1927.

¹⁷ *The Oklahoma Churchman*, December, 1927.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, October, 1929.