

## Clarence J. Harris

Of all the pastors of the First Universalist Church of Sharpsville, none had as remarkable a career as Clarence J. Harris. Rev. Harris was born March 16, 1873 at Northbridge, Massachusetts<sup>1</sup>, and graduated from Revere Lay College in Massachusetts<sup>2</sup> and Bangor Theological Seminary<sup>3</sup>, where he received ministerial training in the Congregationalist tradition. He served Vermont Congregationalist churches during the 1890s at Windham, Colchester, and Putney<sup>4</sup>, and at Crown Point, N.Y. in 1899 and 1900.<sup>5</sup> By 1901, he was in Atlanta as a professor at the Atlanta Congregational Seminary.<sup>6</sup> During this time, he made a missionary tour of the South. The travels deeply impressed Harris and his experiences would figure in later lectures and sermons that illustrated “the quality of cracker and negro preaching”.<sup>7</sup>

In 1902, while still in Atlanta, he converted to the Universalist Church.<sup>8</sup> (The distinctive feature of the Universalists’ creed was universal salvation—i.e., God’s boundless love would not create a soul that was destined for damnation. The denomination originated in New England in the late 1700s, and attracted significant numbers by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.) His first assignment was at Winchester, New Hampshire, a mother church of the faith.<sup>9</sup> By 1904, he was back in Atlanta, now

pastor of the Universalist Church there.<sup>10</sup> Newspaper accounts of his sermons show him, for the most part, expounding on passages from the Gospel and Epistles without controversy.<sup>11</sup> He would at times, though, decry the Pharisaical behavior of some fellow Christians, and a week-long controversy filled *The Atlanta Constitution* when he sparred with other ministers and the mayor after Harris claimed the city and its churches turned its eyes from the needs of Atlanta’s poor.<sup>12</sup>

He came to Sharpsville in 1905.<sup>13</sup> During his time in Sharpsville, Harris preached more and more a liberal theology. (Liberal theology, in a Christian context, rejects dogma and adopts a relativist interpretation of the Bible; it emphasizes the moral teachings of Jesus while viewing skeptically his Incarnation and Resurrection. It is not related to liberalism in a political sense, but is humanist in its espousal of ethics derived from human reason; more radically, Freethought rejects all miraculous or supernatural elements in religion, as well as any religious truth based on tradition or revelation.) In contrast to his Atlanta sermons, Harris wrote in 1908 that in his three years of preaching in Sharpsville he had “never preached anything save the most liberal thought,” with his sermons ranging from “Freethought” to “Socialism”.<sup>14</sup> One reviewer described a collection of his sermons entitled *The Liberal Pulpit* as “radically liberal for a church paper, and is well worth reading by non-church Liberals”<sup>15</sup>. In explaining the difficulty in attracting fellow Freethinkers to his church,

<sup>1</sup> *Massachusetts Vital Records 1841-1910*, 252:309.

<sup>2</sup> *The Worcester Spy* (Worcester, Mass.), 22 May 1892, p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> *Colorado Springs Gazette* (Colorado Springs, Colo.), 24 April 1909, p. 5.

<sup>4</sup> John M. Comstock, *The Congregational Churches of Vermont and their Ministry, 1762-1914*. (St. Johnsbury, Vt.: The Caledonian Co., 1915), pp. 46, 89, 122.

<sup>5</sup> *Springfield Daily Republican* (Springfield, Mass.), 7 August 1899, p. 7; 1900 U.S. Census, Crown Point, Essex Co., N.Y., enumeration district 35, sheet 10.

<sup>6</sup> *The Atlanta Constitution*, 6 April 1902, p 36.

<sup>7</sup> *The Worcester Spy*, 10 April 1903, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> *The Atlanta Constitution*, 13 April 1902, p 10.

<sup>9</sup> *The Winchester Centennial, 1803-1903*. (Boston & Chicago: Universalist Publishing House, 1903), p 109.

<sup>10</sup> *The Atlanta Constitution*, 7 February 1904, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, *The Atlanta Constitution*, 8 February 1904, p. 10; 19 September 1904, p. 6; 9 January 1905, p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> *The Atlanta Constitution*, 18 (p. 6), 20 (p. 8), 21 (p. 8), 23 (p. 7), and 24 (p. 2), all November 1904.

<sup>13</sup> J.G. White, *A Twentieth Century History of Mercer County Pennsylvania*. (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Co., 1909), v. 1, p. 285.

<sup>14</sup> Clarence J. Harris, “A Reply to ‘The Preachers and the People’”, *The Humanitarian Review*. (Los Angeles: Singleton W. Davis), v. VII, no. 3 (October 1908), p. 214.

<sup>15</sup> “Current Publications”, *The Humanitarian Review*, v. VII, no. 3 (October 1908), p. 176.

Harris noted his undeserved reputation locally as an “infidel” and someone who “denies Jesus” and who “ought to be in hell.” During the May 1908 Billy Sunday revival in Sharon, Pa., Harris was the only local minister held up for ridicule with his “entrance into hell by an elevator” described by that fiery evangelist.<sup>16</sup> Despite the radicalism of his sermons,<sup>17</sup> he enjoyed support within Sharpsville. The Universalist church trustees are listed as publishers *The Liberal Pulpit*. He was also connected with the community by serving as secretary of Thomas D. West’s American Anti-Accident Association, originator of the Safety First Movement.<sup>18</sup>

On Palm Sunday of 1909, Rev. Harris announced to a surprised and saddened congregation that he would resign the pastorate. The necessity of a drier clime following weeks abed with pneumonia that January was given as the reason.<sup>19</sup> While it was hoped he would return after a few months convalescence, he soon accepted a position at the First Universalist Church of Colorado Springs. He quickly won over the congregation who accepted him as their permanent pastor only a week into a probationary assignment.<sup>20</sup> Nonetheless, within six months Harris had resigned to take up a position in San Diego; ill health (his wife’s this time) was again cited.<sup>21</sup>

The church he led was not Universalist, but rather the Unitarian Society of San Diego. It is unsurprising, however, that Harris now

<sup>16</sup> Clarence J. Harris, “A Reply to ‘The Preachers and the People’”, p. 214-5.

<sup>17</sup> To be fair, like most reformationists, Harris urged a revival of what he considered true Christianity. In his provocatively titled sermon “The Passing of Present Day Christianity” (published in *The Blue-grass Blade* [Lexington, Ky.], 27 September 1908, pp. 12-13.), Harris argued that a return to the original faith of Jesus and Paul would be achieved only by the enthronement of reason, freedom of thought, and a recognition of the sanctity of human life and divinity of man, while placing everyday needs before future hopes of heaven.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas D. West, *The Efficient Man*. (Cleveland: The Gardner Printing Co., 1914), p. 298.

<sup>19</sup> *The Sharon Telegraph* (Sharon, Pa.), 8 April 1909, p. 3.

<sup>20</sup> *Colorado Springs Gazette*, 30 April 1909, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> *Colorado Springs Gazette*, 14 October 1909, p. 5.

headed a Unitarian congregation. (While both churches arose in late 18<sup>th</sup> century New England, they had distinct theologies: Unitarians denied the doctrine of the Trinity; Universalists’ distinguishing tenet was universal salvation. Nonetheless, many Universalists also rejected the Trinity; moreover the churches shared mutual interests in social reform and an evolving common identity as liberal denominations within American Protestantism. By the time the Unitarian and Universalist churches merged in 1961, their latitudinarian tendencies had eclipsed their original Christian character.)

He was a successful pastor here, overseeing construction of a new church building in 1910 and speedily paying off the debt.<sup>22</sup> Controversy, though, was not far ahead. On February 21, 1912, Rev. Harris announced his withdrawal from the two-month old pact of the Ministerial Association of San Diego not to marry divorced persons. A Reverend Crabtree from the Central Christian Church joined Harris in his protest.<sup>23</sup> Besides being inclined toward a Freethinking view of marriage, Harris’ opinion on this matter was no doubt colored by the fact that he himself was divorced and remarried in 1908.<sup>24</sup> This was at a time when divorce among the clergy was very rare<sup>25</sup> and, except for the party wronged by an adulterer, remarriage of divorced persons was forbidden by most denominations.

Shortly thereafter, he transferred to First Unitarian Church of Oklahoma City. Harris was warmly recommended by the Evangelical Association of San Diego describing his ministry as “of such a character

<sup>22</sup> *Unitarian Word & Work*. (Boston: American Unitarian Assoc.), v. 14, no. 8 (May 1911), p. 5.

<sup>23</sup> *San Jose Mercury* (San Jose, Calif.), 22 February 1912, p. 9.

<sup>24</sup> *The Evening Record* (Greenville, Pa.), 5 February 1908, p. 1 for the divorce; “Mercer County Marriage Records, 1885-1917”. [abstracted from Mercer County Clerk of Orphans Court, Registration of Marriage Licenses], (Mercer County Genealogical Society, 1990), for remarriage.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph A. Hill, “The Statistics of Divorce”, *Quarterly Publications of the American Statistical Association*. (Boston: American Statistical Assoc.), v. 11, No. 86 (June 1909), pp. 499-501

as to dispel prejudice and make for Christian unity" and calling him a "leading force and a helpful presence in all works of human service in this city." The *San Diego Daily Union* likewise commented that: "Since Harris' incumbency the church has prospered, taking its place among the foremost religious organizations of the city. His departure will be exceedingly regretted by members of the clergy throughout the city as well as by hundreds of warm friends outside the church who respect him for his ability, his democratic manner and friendly attitude toward all classes."<sup>26</sup> Nonetheless, these repeated instances of minor controversy, followed by a hasty but much lamented departure—sometimes accompanied by a claim of ill health—leads one to wonder about the bruised feelings and parish dissension the newspaper announcements perhaps omit.

While in Oklahoma City, Harris began writing scenarios and screenplays for motion pictures. The first screenplay accepted was the *Trail of the Lost Chord*,<sup>27</sup> which was produced by the American Film Manufacturing Co. (the "Flying A Studios") of Santa Barbara, California. In all, from 1913 to 1917, Harris is credited with writing or collaborating on the story or screenplay for over two hundred motion pictures.<sup>28</sup> He strove to write for literary or classic productions with a moral, even allegorical, character. Indeed he considered his dramatic efforts as complementing his ministerial work. He saw in the "motion picture drama ... the best possible way to present a moral or religious lesson."<sup>29</sup> When the Oklahoma Legislature debated closing the movie houses on Sundays, in contrast to the ministers who agitated for the bill, Harris prominently

<sup>26</sup> *The Daily Oklahoman* (Oklahoma City, Okla.), 12 September 1912, p. 12.

<sup>27</sup> *The Daily Oklahoman*, 14 November 1913, p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Ernest A. Dench, *Motion Picture Education*. (Cincinnati: Standard Publishing Co., 1917), p. 139. Per *The Sunday Oregonian* (Portland, Ore.), 3 September 1916, p. 7: "In the last three years he has been writing scenarios, he has sold 275 reels to more than fifteen producing companies."

<sup>29</sup> *The Daily Oklahoman*, 14 November 1913, p. 12.

opposed such a ban. Among his arguments were: "The work of the church today is in harmony with the theatre and all amusements; what is bad on Sunday is just as bad any other day, and what is fit on a week-day is fit on a Sunday. The church can stand without legislative support, if it cannot the divineness of its mission is doubtful."<sup>30</sup>

With over two hundred films to his credit and eventually employed as a staff writer and editor for the Gaumont and Fox studios<sup>31</sup> it would have been difficult to keep to his stated goal of writing only the morally uplifting while avoiding "a comedy or sensational melodrama."<sup>32</sup> While films like *The Spender* were chosen by a temperance society to demonstrate the evils of drink,<sup>33</sup> the title of *The Vivisectionist*<sup>34</sup> certainly suggests a lurid tale. *A Daughter of the Gods*,<sup>35</sup> starring the Australian swimming sensation and exemplar of beauty Annette Kellerman, with its spectacular sets and cast of nearly 20,000 extras filmed on location in Jamaica, was the first feature with a million dollar budget as well as the first to contain a nude scene.<sup>36</sup> Despite tastefully employing Kellerman's long tresses of hair, the nudity outraged the likes of Rev. L.K. Peacock<sup>37</sup>, an acolyte of Billy Sunday, and an old adversary from Harris' days in Sharpsville.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>30</sup> *The Daily Oklahoman*, 28 February 1915, p. 12

<sup>31</sup> *The Editor*. (Ridgewood, N.J.: The Editor Co.), v. 41, no. 10 (22 May 1915), p. 521; *The Sunday Oregonian*, 3 September 1916, p. 7.

<sup>32</sup> *The Daily Oklahoman*, 14 November 1913, p. 12

<sup>33</sup> *New York Times*, 7 June 1915, p. 11.

<sup>34</sup> *The New York Clipper* (New York, N.Y.), 8 May 1915, p 14.

<sup>35</sup> *Kingston Daily Freeman* (Kingston, N.Y.), 7 March 1917, p. 2, crediting him with the writing; the film is now lost.

<sup>36</sup> *New York Times*, 18 October 1916, p. 9; *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 6 May 1916, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> *Kingston Daily Freeman*, 7 March 1917, p. 2. The film's run in Kingston coincided with Peacock's revival meetings there.

<sup>38</sup> Before he joined Billy Sunday as general manager of his campaigns (see Theodore Thomas Frankenberg, *Spectacular Career of Billy Sunday, Famous Baseball Evangelist*, [Columbus, Oh.: McClelland & Co., 1913], pp. 120-1), Peacock was pastor of the Sharon United Presbyterian Church

By 1916, Harris had moved to New York City, having left the ministry and devoted himself to screenwriting full-time.<sup>39</sup> (This was no sudden decision, for back in 1908 he wrote: "It has been a conviction of mine for months that I can be of larger service to humanity if I could cast off my 'Rev.' and get out among the 'people' and tell them the glories of life and obligations of living.")<sup>40</sup> By March 1917, however, he was back in the pulpit, pastoring the Church of Our Father in Newburgh, N.Y.<sup>41</sup> He then moved to the Washington Heights Universalist Church in Manhattan in 1918. For once, he found a church at which to settle, staying there twenty years. The congregation disbanded on his retirement in 1938.<sup>42</sup>

During the time of the United States' entry into the First World War, a patriotic ardor arose in Harris which would continue throughout his life. *The Little American*, a 1917 Cecil B. DeMille film starring Mary Pickford that Harris co-wrote, propagandized against the barbarism of German troops and U-boats.<sup>43</sup> Three years later, Harris founded the United States Junior Naval Guard, and later the United States Junior Aviation Corps. These organizations appear to have been something of a cross between the Boy Scouts and R.O.T.C. They were frequent participants in parades and patriotic events in the New York City area,

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and one of the foremost workers of the 1908 Billy Sunday campaign in Sharon that so viciously attacked Harris (see *New Castle News*, 29 April 1910, p. 12).

<sup>39</sup> *The Sunday Oregonian*, 3 September 1916, p 7, gives as the reason for his retirement from the ministry: "Clarence Harris' health broke down, as a result of six years of strenuous Western missionary work. For months he could not use his voice, the screen became his mouthpiece."

<sup>40</sup> Clarence J. Harris, "Do 'the People' Want the Truth?", letter to *The Humanitarian Review*, v. VII, no. 4 (November 1908), p. 248.

<sup>41</sup> *Kingston Daily Freeman*, 7 March 1917, p. 2.

<sup>42</sup> *New York Times*, 29 November 1941, p. 17.

<sup>43</sup> "The Little American", *The Internet Movie Database*, [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com) (17 January 2011).

until their disbandment in 1937.<sup>44</sup> Prior to the beginning of a second world war, Harris spoke as a strong opponent of unqualified pacifism. In response to an anti-war petition circulated by a group of clergymen in 1935, Harris said he was "disgusted" with them for what he termed "a display of near treason".<sup>45</sup>

After 1917, no film credits for Harris are found, though he maintained an interest in the field. In 1921 he incorporated the All-Story Films Corp.<sup>46</sup> (which appears to have had no actual productions) and was advertising classes and private instruction in writing screenplays.<sup>47</sup>

Around this time, Harris started a summer camp for boys in the Adirondacks, Camp Wamego—with Harris and his wife Muriel serving as directors.<sup>48</sup> Though advertised for a time as "The Boys' Country Club of the Adirondacks,"<sup>49</sup> he spoke of its aims as deepening a boy's character mainly through associating with others and connecting with nature.<sup>50</sup> Nearly the entire camp burned in February 1939, with Harris escaping through a window.<sup>51</sup> He cut ties when the camp reopened, with (apparently unfulfilled) plans to start another summer camp at Lake Luzerne, N.Y. for deserving boys who could not afford the cost of the new Wamego.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *New York Times*, 29 November 1941, p. 17 for its founding and disbandment. For mentions in parades and exercises, see, for example *New York Times* 21 November 1927, p. 8; 13 January 1930, p. 44, 4 May 1931, p. 19.

<sup>45</sup> *New York Times*, 30 April 1935, p. 9.

<sup>46</sup> *New York Times*, 29 April 1921, p. 30.

<sup>47</sup> *The Evening Telegram* (New York, N.Y.), 28 November 1921, p. 14.

<sup>48</sup> *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1931 Summer Camp Directory, p. 2, noting Wamego "opens its tenth season."

<sup>49</sup> *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1925 Summer Camp Directory, p. 4.

<sup>50</sup> *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 1931 Summer Camp Directory, p. 2.

<sup>51</sup> *The Leader-Republican* (Gloversville, N.Y.), 6 February 1939, p. 14.

<sup>52</sup> *The Christian Leader*. (Boston: Universalist Publishing House), v. 121, no. 26 (1 July 1939) p. 624.

In 1937, as a last enthusiasm, Harris founded the Animals Friends' League, later the Dog Lovers League of America, in response to recent bans of dogs by New York landlords as well as overzealous municipal "dog-menace" laws.<sup>53</sup> This was perhaps not a new concern, for back during his Crown Point pastorate at the turn of the century, Harris edited and published *Humane Christian Culture* a magazine dedicated to the humane treatment of animals.<sup>54</sup>

After his retirement, Harris' characteristic restlessness reawakened, with a move from Manhattan to Camp Wamego in 1938. Following the fire, he moved to Sharpsville in 1940, but soon returned to New York City, after wintering at another scene of days past, in Georgia.<sup>55</sup>

Clarence J. Harris' remarkable life came to a close November 27, 1941 at New York City. He was survived by his wife Muriel Seibel Harris, two sons and three daughters.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> *New York Times*, 17 October 1937, p. 10. His obituary (*New York Times*, 29 November 1941, p. 17) calls it the Dog Lovers League of America.

<sup>54</sup> *Report of the Proceedings of the Twenty-Third Annual Convention of the American Humane Association Held at Columbus, Ohio, October 24, 25, 26, 1899*, p. 49.

<sup>55</sup> *The Christian Leader*, v. 122, no. 39 (28 September 1940) p. 865 ; v. 123, no. 21 (24 May 1941) p. 453.

<sup>56</sup> *New York Times*, 29 November 1941, p. 17.