

# HERITAGE

## The Pioneer Evangelist in Adams County

by Jerry Rushford

William Randolph Cunningham was born near Paris, Bourbon County, Kentucky, in the very heart-land of the Restoration Movement on April 14, 1834. The historic Cane Ridge Meeting-house was located just a few miles from his home. The merger of the Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell back-to-the-Bible movements in 1832 had resulted in a vigorous and united movement to restore New Testament Christianity that was sweeping through Kentucky and adjacent states. This Restoration Movement was enjoying stunning evangelistic success in Bourbon and surrounding counties in the three decades prior to the Civil War.

The famed evangelist from Kentucky, John T. Johnson, immersed W. R. Cunningham into Christ on December 19, 1855, during an evangelistic meeting in Bourbon County. Cunningham was 21 years old. In the autumn of 1858, when he was 24 years old, he enrolled in Alexander Campbell's Bethany College in what is now West Virginia. However, he did not enroll in Bethany to train for the ministry of preaching. "I had no idea of being a preacher," he recalled later. It would be more than a decade before he preached his first sermon.

When the Civil War began, Cunningham joined the Confederate Army in his home state of Kentucky. He fought under General John Hunt Morgan and was wounded in the battle of Buffington Island in July 1863. During a period of convalescence he read Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation and changed his mind about the

nobility of the Confederate cause. In April 1864 he took the oath of allegiance to the Union and was restored to citizenship.



W. R. Cunningham 1834-1919

Following the Civil War years and his marriage to Rebecca James in 1865, Cunningham moved his young family to Cass County, Missouri, south of Kansas City. His faithfulness to the cause of Christ continued during these years, and it was in Cass County that he began preaching the gospel of Christ in May 1870, less than a month after his 36<sup>th</sup> birthday. It was the beginning of a belated evangelistic ministry that would span nearly half a century.

In his own unpublished autobiography, written many years later in the third person, Cunningham modestly noted:

In 1870, in May, beginning the first Lord's Day, he began his labors as a preacher of the Churches of Christ. In his work as a preacher he has been successful in the evangelistic field having immersed a great many people wherever he has labored.

After a 19-year ministry in Missouri, W. R. Cunningham moved his family to Washington Territory in April 1889. The Territory achieved Statehood a few months after they arrived. The

Cunninghams were drawn to sparsely populated Adams County where they discovered several families from the Church of Christ. "I believe we have more persons who were members of the Church of Christ before coming here than belong to any of the sectarian denominations," observed one church member from Iowa. "There are little settlements of them in all parts of the county."

The Cunningham family arrived in Ritzville on April 22, 1889. They established a home in Ritzville, which they always kept, but they would eventually settle on a farm 33 miles west of Ritzville, near Scott's Station on the Northern Pacific Railroad. W. R. Cunningham began preaching immediately upon his arrival in Adams County and when he immersed Jacob and Belle King into Christ in May 1889, he was fairly certain they were the first persons immersed in the county. In October 1889 Cunningham estimated that there were "probably 300" members of the Church of Christ living in Adams County.

For the first five and a half years of his residency in Washington, Cunningham was involved in building up his property in town and his farm in the country and he only preached on Sundays. A former classmate from Bethany College visited him in April 1893 and wrote: "I spent a very pleasant evening with Bro. W. R. Cunningham and his estimable family. We had not seen each other since 1860. He owns a large ranch on both sides of the great Northern Pacific R.R., and his house is located within 100 yards of the railroad."



Cunningham, Washington, in the early 1900s. The town was named for W. R. Cunningham.

In May 1894 Cunningham preached for 12 members of the Church of Christ who were meeting in Delight Schoolhouse in south central Adams County. He preached for them on a monthly basis that summer and baptized several converts and organized a congregation of 24 members in October 1894. At that point, his wife encouraged her 60-year-old husband to devote all of his energy to evangelism. "In the autumn of 1894," he wrote later, "by the request and earnest solicitation of my wife, I gave a mortgage of my entire time to the Lord without any promise of remuneration from a human being." It was the beginning of five exciting years of evangelism that carried him through Washington, Oregon, and Idaho. For the next five years the church papers were filled with his evangelistic reports.

Cunningham returned to Delight Schoolhouse in November 1894 to launch his new work as an evangelist. "November 25 was the beginning of one of the most successful meetings I ever held," he recalled later, "though the number that obeyed was not as great as many that I have held. The meeting continued until December 21, and the result was thirty two immersions." Cunningham

left them with a congregation of 58 members, served by three elders and three deacons. "Considering the number of inhabitants residing there it is the most successful meeting I ever held, for there were but six persons left in disobedience."

Following Cunningham's meeting in Lind, Washington, in December 1895 one church leader reported: "Bro. W. R. Cunningham is a fearless, logical speaker, and is doing more good for the cause of Christ than any man in this State of whom I have any knowledge." Such praise of Cunningham was common. After his meeting in Spokane in May 1897, a woman named Julia Merriman sent a report to the *Christian Leader*. "He has given us some fine sermons along the old paths," she enthused. "He is an honest, sincere, courageous man. His eyes are set squarely in his head, and wide enough open to assure one of his frank, fearless purpose — that there is no cunning dissimulation in his make up. Where the Bible speaks, he tries to speak, and in a clear, logical, convincing manner."

The first weeks of 1898 found Cunningham in Spokane County where he established congregations of the Church of Christ in Cheney and Plaza. "It rejoices me greatly to think that only one month and ten days of 1898 have passed and I have had the privilege of setting in order two apostolic congregations in this State" he reported in the *Christian Leader*. From there he went to Whitman County where he preached in meetings at Pleasant Valley, Garfield, and Colfax with additions at each place.

At the close of 1898 he was still going strong. "Apostolic Christianity is gaining ground in this State," he informed the *Christian Leader*. "More apostolic preachers are needed in the State, Oregon and Idaho, but it will require

men who can endure hardships, as did the pioneers of the Restoration."

When he left the evangelistic field in the fall of 1899, Cunningham became a successful real estate agent in Adams County. He was especially adept at selling land to members of the Church of Christ who were migrating to Washington. By 1901, he had platted a town near Scott's Station and named it for himself. He also established a church in the little community and preached for it on Sundays. The town of Cunningham, Washington, reached its peak in 1913 with a population of more than 300.

Throughout the 1890s and early 1900s, the Restoration Movement in Washington was suffering through a gradual division between "progressives" (who became the Disciples of Christ) and "conservatives" (who became the Churches of Christ). Like many other pioneer preachers, Cunningham's loyalties were severely tested. For years he maintained contact with church leaders and congregations on both sides, but after his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1909 he found himself more at home with the Churches of Christ. Beginning in 1909, he often took the train into Spokane and preached for the Church of Christ that met at 518 Nora Avenue across from North Central High School.

In the last years of his life, Cunningham listed his name in the *Preachers in Churches of Christ* booklets that were issued annually by *Firm Foundation*, *Gospel Advocate*, and *Christian Leader*. When his wife died in 1911 he buried her on a wooded hill in Greenwood Memorial Terrace on the western edge of Spokane. When the old evangelist died on April 11, 1919, three days before his 85<sup>th</sup> birthday, his children buried him beside his wife on the lovely hillside. He has been forgotten for nearly a century, but W. R. Cunningham was one of those faithful pioneers in the Great Northwest who laid a foundation on which we now build.



W. R. Cunningham in later years. When he died he was buried next to his wife in Spokane, Washington.



Cunningham, Washington, as it looks today.