

History is His Story

What baseball player spoke to larger crowds than he played for? Billy Sunday was born in Ames, Iowa in 1862. His father fought in the Civil War and died without ever seeing Billy. His mother, destitute, sent Billy to an orphanage along with his brother. Billy made it through high school and went to Marshalltown where he played on the state champion baseball team there. The Chicago White Sox saw his skills and signed him in 1883.

One Sunday, Billy and his pals went to a bar in Chicago and got drunk. He sat down on a curb and heard a Gospel band across the street playing songs he remembered his mother singing long ago in their little shack. He began to sob. One of the band members saw his tears and invited him to a Mission downtown. Sunday staggered to his feet and told his teammates, "I'm going to Jesus Christ. We've come to a parting of our ways." They all laughed except one friend who knew the story of his life and he encouraged Billy to go. And there at the Mission, Billy found his Lord, Savior and Friend. The next day when he got to the ballpark, he was surprised to see his friends supporting what he had done.

He joined a Presbyterian church and became a regular Bible Study attendee at the local YMCA. He married the sister of the equipment manager and batboy of the White Sox. A decade later, he retired and began to work for the Y. J. Wilber Chapman, a traveling evangelist hired him as advance man. A few years later, Chapman stopped traveling and began to hold evangelistic services in Garner, Iowa. Billy filled in and became acclaimed, getting many invitations to guest preach. Soon he was doing evangelical revivals and other events. As word of his thunderous preaching spread, he ventured from Iowa to the Midwest to the East Coast. At the end of each service, Billy did a version of the altar call, asking people who wanted to become believers to come forward and commit their lives to Christ. For 40 years he preached almost daily, to an estimated 100 million people. In one crusade in New York City, he had 98,264 people who came forward "on the sawdust trail to the cross" as he called it. Hundreds of thousands put their faith in Jesus Christ because of his crusades. In the audience was a young man who was also named Billy, Billy Graham. 15 years after Sunday, Graham began his crusades, which had a striking resemblance to those of Billy Sunday—rousing gospel music and choirs, a sermon that went straight to the heart and asked for a response in faith, and a call to come forward and commit to Jesus Christ.

A friend of mine accompanied Dr. Graham at Kansas State University briefly when he had a crusade in Manhattan (1973?). He asked, "Dr. Graham, if you could not preach to enormous crowds like you do, what would you do in a little local church?" He nodded thoughtfully and replied. "I would find someone else who believed and spend a lot of time together spurring each other on in faith, for six months. Then we would split and each find another or witness to another, and do the same thing all over again. Just keep multiplying and as Billy Sunday said, 'Game on!'"