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## Billy Graham In Florida

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## BILLY GRAHAM IN FLORIDA

by LOIS FERM

**B**ILLY GRAHAM, who suffered periodic attacks of influenza when he was a young boy, first came to Florida because the doctors hoped that a warm climate would restore his health. However, in terms of his career in evangelism, his decision to move South seems almost providential, for as a student at the Florida Bible Institute in Tampa in the 1930s, he was exposed to a veritable "Who's Who" of evangelical giants. As a high school student, Billy had accepted the claims of Jesus Christ on his life and had surrendered his life to Christ in a revival service held in his home town of Charlotte, North Carolina. Yet his vocational plans were nebulous when he graduated in June 1936. At that time Billy thought he might become "a Christian baseball player or a farmer."<sup>1</sup>

Graham's conversion caused him to be more serious and concerned about spiritual matters. This was somewhat opposite to his rather carefree attitude toward other things. His parents, hoping to conserve this religious commitment and yet to harness his restless energy toward satisfactory life goals, enrolled him in September 1936, in Bob Jones University, a fundamentalist religious college, in Cleveland, Tennessee. During his first semester Billy suffered from so many upper respiratory problems that he was forced to return home. He would have to change locations if he hoped to improve. His mother was disappointed when the doctor said Billy needed to get down into the Florida sunshine. She wanted him nearby, but the family realized the wisdom of the doctor's advice. Billy had heard about the Florida Bible Institute from his schoolmate, Wendell Phillips, who was already a student, and he wanted very much to attend.<sup>2</sup> The Grahams inquired about the Institute (now Trinity Bible College in Dune-din, Florida), from Mr. and Mrs. Osmer Taffner, St. Petersburg friends, who recommended it as "a good Christian school."

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Lois Ferm is Resource Coordinator, Billy Graham Evangelistic Association Team Office, and directs the oral history program.

1. Interview with William Franklin Graham, January 18, 1980.
2. Interview with Morrow Graham (Mrs. William Franklin), June 3, 1977, tape (OH290) and transcript at Billy Graham Center, Wheaton College, Wheaton, Illinois.

In early January 1937, the Graham family drove from Charlotte to Tampa. The Reverend John Minder, acting dean of the school, recalled that they arrived while the students were still away on the holiday break: "I had just stepped outside the back door when a Chevrolet drove up and stopped; a young man got out and stretched. Then the father got out, came over to where I was and said, 'I'm Frank Graham. I came down to enter my son, Billy Frank, in School'."<sup>3</sup> After unloading the luggage and eating lunch, Billy's parents left to spend the night with Mrs. Graham's sister and brother-in-law, Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Bailes, who operated a boarding house in downtown Orlando.

The Institute was the result of the dreams and hard work of Dr. William Thomas Watson, its founder and president. He had come to Florida with his friend, John Minder, following their graduation from Nyack Bible College (New York) in 1922. They worked together in evangelistic efforts in Florida for two years. On Easter Sunday, April 20, 1924, Watson went to St. Petersburg to establish the St. Petersburg Gospel Tabernacle. By Thanksgiving Day that same year, only seven months after the founding of the Tabernacle, a permanent building, complete with an auditorium seating 4,000 people, was standing at the corner of Fifth Avenue South and Seventh Street.<sup>4</sup>

Dr. Watson's work continued to expand. He next planned a combined conference and college that would allow students to be exposed to Bible teachers and preachers. At one point, Dr. Watson visited the Reverend J. W. Van De Venter in Temple Terrace, a residential suburb a few miles from downtown Tampa, situated in extensive orange groves. The area had been a winter retreat for wealthy Northerners. There, tucked among the palm trees, Dr. Watson found a large pink stucco building, that had been built as a hotel, flanked by a golf course and tennis courts. "Wouldn't that make a wonderful Bible College?" he remarked. Van De Venter, knowing the real estate situation in the area, thought that it might be possible to acquire the property.<sup>5</sup> As one contemporary writer, Evanell Powell, later observed, "The

3. Interview with John Minder, February 14, 1977, tape (OH279) and transcript at Billy Graham Center.

4. Trinity Bible College banquet honoring Dr. Watson on his seventy-fifth birthday, Jack Tar Harrison Hotel, Clearwater, Florida, April 28, 1976, tape at Trinity Bible College, Dunedin, Florida.

5. *Ibid.*

Depression years were struggling ones for most Tampanns. With so much speculative buying in the boom time [the Florida boom had collapsed in 1926] many people were left with land unable to be developed and no monies to pay the taxes.<sup>6</sup> Within a year the dream had become a reality. A benefactor in New York agreed to sell to the Institute with no payments required for the first ten years, and no interest. The school opened in 1932, and the first class was graduated two years later.

An incident occurred some weeks after Billy arrived on campus. "A lady came out and asked: 'Are you the new student, Billy Graham?' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'Do you know how to drive a car and do you have a driver's license?' I said, 'Yes.' She said, 'We have some tourists here and nobody to show them to the Gasparilla.' Well, I had never heard of the Gasparilla and I'd never been to Tampa. I got into the car and drove them on a guided tour of Tampa. Those people never came back to Florida Bible Institute again. Dr. Watson lost some potential givers to the school."<sup>7</sup>

Florida and the nation were still in the throes of the Depression when Billy Graham was a student at the Institute. Vera Resue, one of Billy's classmates, remembered that in those early days students had little money and had to create their own "good times." All were required to do what was called "practical work." They went into the nearby communities to speak and counsel prisoners in jail, to assist in church services, and to teach Sunday school.<sup>8</sup> They usually traveled together by bus. The school needed revenue and it continued to operate the hotel, mainly for the Northerners; many had been coming regularly for years. During the winter months there were about 100 visitors, some remaining for several weeks, and they occupied the larger and more comfortable rooms in the building. Meals were served to the guests, either in their rooms or in the dining room, but not when the students were using the facilities. There were also approximately 100 students enrolled in the Institute, and they worked in the kitchen, served in the dining room, and did other work on

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6. Evanell Klintworth Powell, *Tampa That Was* (Boynton Beach, Florida, 1973), 115.

7. Trinity Bible College banquet tape.

8. Interview with Vera Resue, April 18, 1980, tape (OH395) and transcript at Billy Graham Center.

campus. This helped to hold down the operating costs of the school and to maintain a low tuition.

Billy Graham's family, while not wealthy, could afford to support him in school, but since most of his friends worked, he wanted to also. His first job was washing dishes for which he was paid twenty cents an hour. He later became a waiter in the dining room. He also worked as a caddy at the adjacent golf course. Billy was personable, intelligent, and friendly, and he got along well with his classmates. He became president of his senior class, and he was managing editor of the 1940 yearbook, *The Beacon*. He particularly enjoyed outdoor activities, and his health improved in Florida. He played golf, tennis, and volleyball, and went canoeing with his friends on the Hillsborough River. The students also enjoyed oyster suppers and picnics at Indian Rocks. Billy especially liked baseball, and he watched the major teams which then (and now) held their spring practice in Tampa and the surrounding area.

Although he was handicapped by his relatively mediocre academic preparation, Billy worked hard to earn above-average grades. The present [1981] registrar of the school, Dr. Earl Collins, points out that Billy was at an academic disadvantage when he enrolled for the school's second semester on January 21, 1937, even with nine hours of transferred credit.<sup>9</sup> His transcript shows that he took courses in Bible introduction, history, analysis, doctrine (homiletics), and geography. He also studied hermeneutics, prophecy, church history, comparative religions, ethics, and personal evangelism. Since the school was neither a college nor a seminary, only a few academic subjects were offered, including psychology, English, and history. Billy never took a course in public speaking at the Institute.<sup>10</sup>

One reason for Billy's academic success was the individual attention which he, and all the other students, received from the faculty. The late Reverend John Minder served as Billy's advisor and counselor. In addition to the faculty there were outstanding evangelical leaders who were speakers at a Bible conference each winter. The students heard these men during the morning chapel hour and at an evening service. There were other opportunities

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9. Interview with Dr. Earl Collins, January 16, 1980.

10. Graham college records, office of the registrar, Trinity College.

to interact with them in the dining room and on the golf course. Billy gave close attention to the messages of these speakers. The conference bulletins from that period read like an evangelical hall of fame. Among the men were Dr. H. C. Morrison, president of Asbury College, Wilmore, Kentucky; Gypsy Smith, the well-known itinerant gypsy evangelist from England; Dr. E. J. Pace, a religious cartoonist with the *Sunday School Times*; Dr. William Evans, a teacher at Moody Bible Institute; B. D. Ackley, a composer of hymns; Mel Trotter, founder of the mission in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which carried his name; R. G. LeTourneau, the industrialist; the Reverend Clarence Jones, head of the missionary radio station, HCJB, in Quito, Ecuador; Dr. Oswald Smith of People's Church, Toronto, Canada; Dr. Albert Hughes, Toronto; Dr. William Ward Ayer of Calvary Baptist Church, New York City; Homer Rodeheaver, song leader for the evangelist, Billy Sunday; Dr. Arno C. Gabelein, author and headmaster of Stony Brook School in Long Island; the Reverend Vance Havner, the "Will Rogers of the Pulpit"; and Dr. William R. Newell of Moody Bible Institute.<sup>11</sup>

Two men had a special impact on Billy Graham. One of these was Dr. W. B. Riley, president of Northwestern Schools in Minneapolis, Minnesota. In 1947, after Billy had acquired a reputation in evangelism circles, Dr. Riley in a death bed request persuaded Billy to become the next president of the schools. Billy acquiesced and assumed the presidency for a short period of time but he realized that his calling was to evangelism, not to education, and he soon resigned.

The other individual was John Mott of New York City, a Methodist layman who had worked, along with Dwight L. Moody, to develop the Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions. Mott also organized the World's Student Christian Federation, and later was chairman of the International Missionary Council, now part of the World Council of Churches. Mott served as a model for many of Billy's later ventures.<sup>12</sup> In later years, Billy Graham in a commencement at the Florida Bible Institute, remembered that he "had spent three glorious, happy, character-building, life-changing years in the spiritual atmosphere of the

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11. Conference bulletins of the Florida Bible Institute, 1938-1941.

12. Basil Matthews, *John R. Mott, World Citizen* (New York, 1934).

institution."<sup>13</sup>

The Reverend John Minder served as Billy's special advisor and counselor. In addition to his duties as a member of the faculty, Reverend Minder was serving as a pastor in Melrose, Florida, in 1922. It was during this period that Minder found a way to secure property on nearby Lake Swan in Putnam County for his Bible conference activities. The first conference was held on the grounds there in 1927, and it continued to expand its activities over the years. After his retirement, Minder and his wife lived part of each year at Lake Swan.

During Easter vacation, April 1938, the Reverend Minder invited Billy to the conference. On Easter Sunday, April 17, he and Billy drove to Palatka, some twenty-five miles away, to visit Cecil Underwood, a part-time Baptist preacher who lived there. When they arrived, Underwood announced that he was to be the guest minister that evening in the Baptist church at Bostwick, a town twelve miles north of Palatka. He invited Billy and Minder to accompany him, and they decided to go along.

As Minder recalled: "Just before we got to the church, Mr. Underwood turned to me and said, 'Mr. Minder, will you preach for me tonight?' I said, 'No, Billy's going to preach.' Billy said, 'No sir, I can't.' I said, 'You go ahead, and when you run out, I'll take over'."<sup>14</sup> Most of Billy's speaking experiences so far had been on street corners, at the Tampa Trailer Park, and at the Tampa Rescue Mission. His repertoire included just four sermons which he practiced whenever he had the chance. The inattentiveness of some of his audiences, Billy's own energy, plus his desire to communicate his message had resulted in a very rapid style of delivery.

When Underwood and his friends arrived in Bostwick, they found a small congregation—mainly cowboys from the area. Though it was spring, the weather was chilly as it sometimes is in Florida in April, but a large round stove in the middle of the white clapboard church provided warmth. Billy preached all four of his sermons that evening in Bostwick. He talked so rapidly, however, the service was too short, and Mr. Minder had to take over.

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13. William Thomas Watson, *The Bible School Days of Billy Graham* (Dunedin, Florida, 1965), flyleaf.

14. Interview with John Minder, February 14, 1977.

Billy was living at this time with the Minders in their home at 2310 Jefferson Street in Tampa. On the Saturday after the Bostwick experience, Minder asked Billy to speak the following evening at the Tampa Gospel Tabernacle at the corner of Jefferson and Amelia streets. Billy agreed, but he was fearful that he might preach too rapidly again and run out of material before the service was scheduled to end. He appealed to Woodrow Flynn, his roommate, for help. Flynn gave him a sermon on Belshazzar's feast (Daniel 5). Billy found the related scriptural passages, and he practiced and prayed throughout the night. He was apprehensive that he might fail again, but he did not. He performed very well, and by the end of the summer, he was asked to help with the youth work at the Tabernacle.

Emily Cavanaugh, an attractive young lady one year ahead of Billy in school, began to attract his attention. She possessed a charming personality, musical ability, and athletic skill. They enjoyed each other's company and did many things together, including working at the Tampa Tabernacle. It was obvious that Billy was getting serious, but Emily felt he had not thought deeply enough about his Christian commitment. She decided to sever the relationship with him. "Of course I felt loss and emptiness," Billy recalled, "but I had a peace that God was working out some plan for my life."<sup>15</sup>

Members of the faculty and the president's secretary, Brunette Brock, were urging Billy to go into the ministry. He realized the time had come for him to make a decision about his future life. At night he would roam across the clipped lawns of the Temple Terrace golf course and along the unpaved streets around the school, trying to think through his problem. He later remembered that it was one moonlit night, just as he was standing near the eighteenth hole of the course, that he reached the conclusion that he would become a preacher.

He had made his commitment, but there were few opportunities for him to gain expertise as a pulpit speaker. The school operated a placement service, but Billy was still inexperienced, and he had not yet graduated. He decided to hold prayer meetings in the downtown area of Tampa. Once, at the corner of Franklin and Fortune streets, he was standing in the doorway of a bar,

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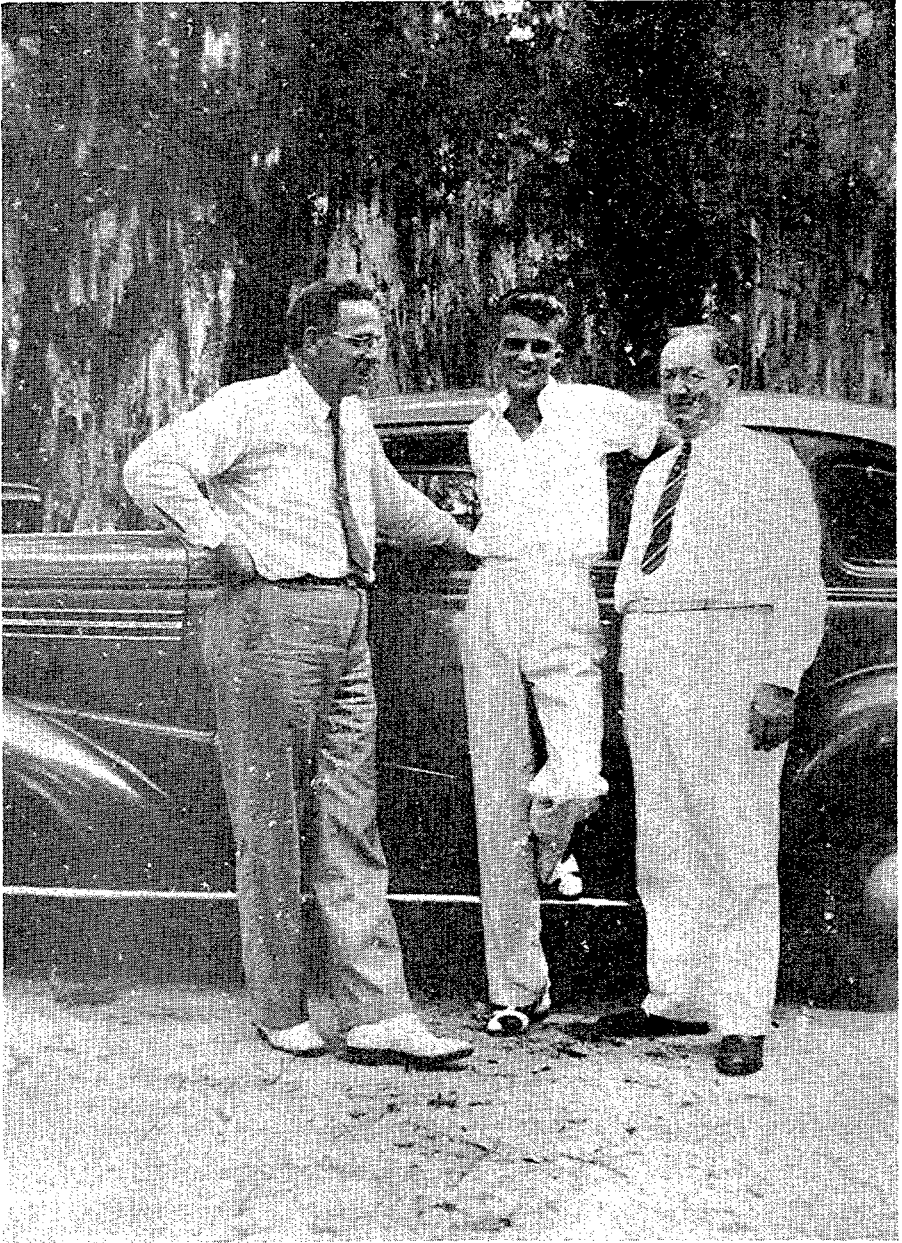
15. Interview with William Franklin Graham, January 18, 1980.





Eighteen-year-old Billy with his Children's Bible Mission class. Photograph courtesy of Billy Graham Evangelistic Association.

Ferm: Billy Graham In Florida



John Minder, Billy Graham, and a professor at Florida Bible Institute, circa 1940. Photograph from *The Beacon*, FBI yearbook, 1940. Courtesy of Vera Resue.

# 8 GREAT DAYS of REVIVAL MEETINGS



will be conducted at the  
**Pomona Baptist Church**  
by the students of  
**The Florida  
Bible Institute**  
of Tampa, Florida

and sponsored by the Peniel Baptist Church  
The Young People of Peniel will  
sing each evening accompanied  
by Instrumental and Vocal Num-  
bers by the Bible Institute Young  
People.

**BILLY GRAHAM** WILL BE THE  
EVANGELIST

and

THE SONG LEADER  
WILL BE **Ponzi Pennington**

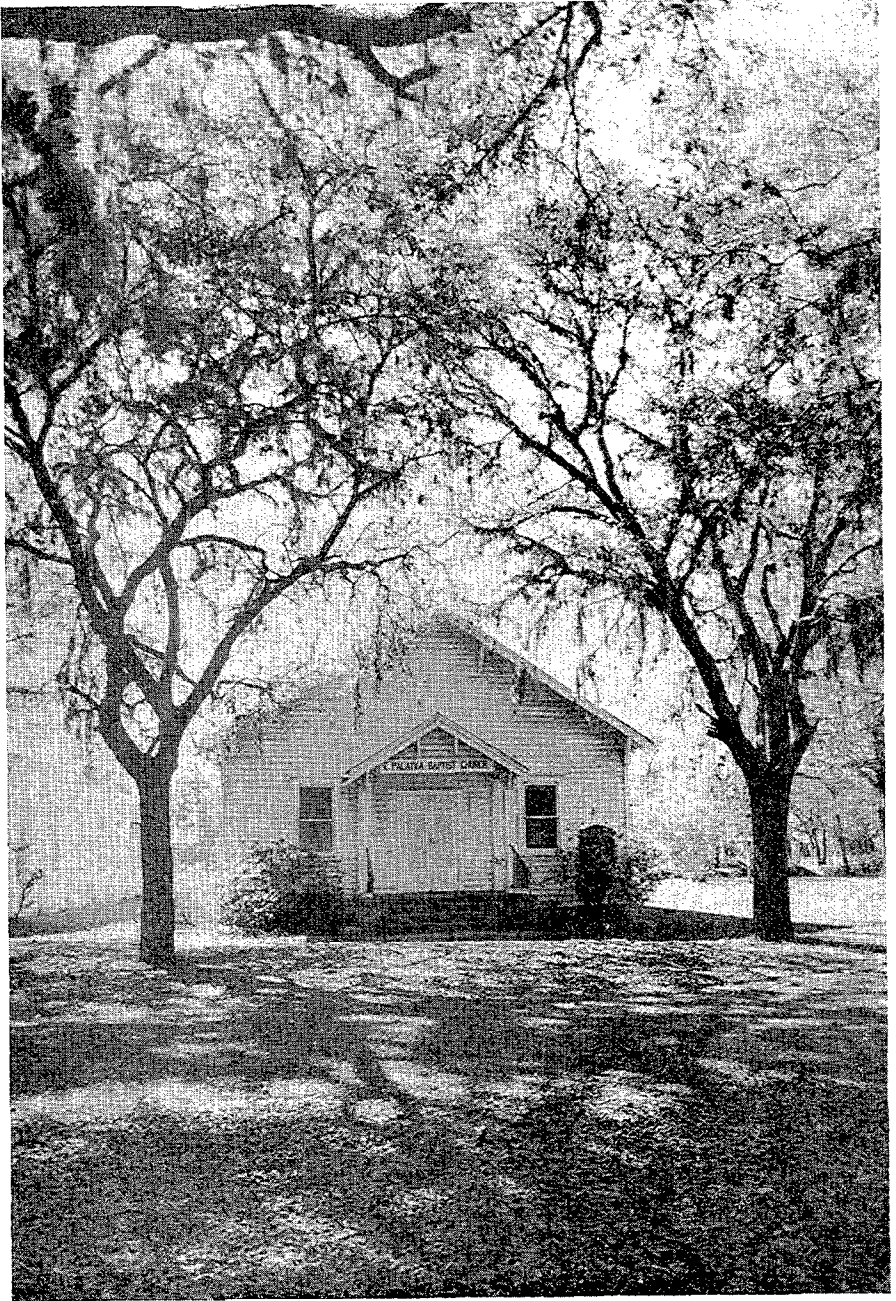
Billy Graham, an outstanding 19 year old evangelist  
who recently conducted a wonderful revival in East Pal-  
atka is to preach each evening at 7:30.

A SPECIAL YOUNG PEOPLE'S SERVICE WILL BE  
CONDUCTED FROM 7:00 TILL 7:30; AND A  
CHILDREN'S MEETING AT 4:00.

**EVERY EVENING AT 7:30**

FLORIDA C.E. NEWS PRINT

Ferm: Billy Graham In Florida



East Palatka Baptist Church were Billy preached his first sermon. Photograph from *The Beacon*, FBI yearbook, 1940. Courtesy of Vera Resue.

preaching to the people inside. A bartender came out and asked him to leave, and when he refused, the man shoved him into the street, damaging Billy's clothes. He did not strike back, however, believing that he was "suffering for Christ's sake."<sup>16</sup>

Soon afterwards, John Minder invited Billy to become assistant pastor at the Tampa Gospel Tabernacle. His responsibilities included working with the people living in the trailer parks, particularly the Municipal Trailer Park on Columbus Drive. Trailer park living was popular in the area; it was cheap and comfortable in the mild Florida climate. Many tourists came into Tampa during the winter months and lived in the parks. Billy also visited the prisoners in the Tampa jail, and organized discussion groups with them. Billy's desire was not to be a preacher, but rather "a winner of souls." Trying to perfect his style, he rehearsed his sermons at isolated places along the Hillsborough River. He was reluctant to practice in the school chapel— someone might hear him, and he was "too unsure of himself to risk that."<sup>17</sup> According to Minder it was this determination to learn, to practice, and to admit when he did not know the answers that was the key to Billy Graham's great success.

Perhaps the earliest photograph of Billy to appear in any newspaper was one in the *Tampa Daily Times* which was published May 28, 1938. It was captioned: "W. F. Graham, 19-year-old Florida Bible Institute student, is associate pastor of the Tampa Gospel Tabernacle and is preaching during the absence of the Rev. John Minder, pastor, who is attending the annual Christian and Missionary Alliance Council at Oakland, Cal. Mr. Graham is a native of Charlotte, N. C."<sup>18</sup> Other invitations to speak in small churches in Hillsborough County and elsewhere in Florida began to arrive. There was a Baptist church in the little community of Venice on the Gulf coast of Florida, and the congregation held services in a converted meat market. Mr. Houser, the father of one of Billy's schoolmates, invited him to speak. Of the approximately eighty-five people in the congrega-

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16. John Pollock, *Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1967), 19. During the 1979 Tampa Crusade, the Tampa Historical Society and the Tampa Ministerial Association placed a marker at Franklin and Fortune streets to commemorate the early meetings.

17. Hampton Dunn, "Tampa and Two Evangelists Named Billy," *Tampa Times*, October 23, 1965.

18. *Tampa Daily Times*, May 28 1938, 3.

tion, thirty-two responded to Billy's invitation "to commit their lives to Christ." Billy was stunned at the response which he received to his invitation. Billy did not believe it was his sermon, or the invitation, but rather the prayer during the afternoon preceding the service with Ponzi Pennington, his partner and song leader, that had produced the surprising results.

Late in 1938, after a summer spent working with children at the Lake Swan Conference with Mr. Minder, Billy was asked by Cecil Underwood to hold a week of evangelistic meetings in the East Palatka church. The congregation was without a pastor and had asked Underwood to secure the service of an evangelist for special meetings. The meetings were to start on Wednesday evening with the Reverend Minder preaching first. Billy spoke on the three following nights and on Sunday morning, and then returned to Tampa for a youth meeting Sunday night. Billy did not think the congregation had responded very enthusiastically to him and he did not want to return, but Minder insisted that he go back.<sup>19</sup> Billy did return to Palatka the following evening and saw that there was a larger crowd in the church. The congregation continued to grow as the week progressed. Again he phoned Minder: "I don't know what to do. These people don't want me to stop. What shall I do?" Minder told his protégé, "Well, it's up to you now. You have come to the time when you must make decisions for yourself. The thing for you to do is pray and see what you feel the Lord wants you to do; then do it."<sup>20</sup> Billy followed this advice and the meetings were extended. When the Reverend Minder arrived the last night, he found the church so crowded that people were standing outside listening by loud speakers.

The news of Billy's success in East Palatka traveled into the small nearby communities, and in November 1938, Underwood invited him to hold services in his church at Peniel, about twenty-five miles south of Palatka.<sup>21</sup> The Peniel church, according to Underwood, "thought so much of him that they were willing to ordain him when we asked them about it. There were a few old timers who didn't like the idea, but they finally agreed."<sup>22</sup> Billy

19. Interview with John Minder, February 14, 1977.

20. *Ibid.*

21. This structure has been restored by the members of the Peniel Historical Society.

22. Interview with Cecil Underwood, March 14, 1977, tape (OH284) and transcript at Billy Graham Center.

was young and inexperienced, and he also had been brought up in the Reformed Presbyterian tradition, and so had not been baptized by immersion, an ordinance required for membership in a Baptist church. Consequently Billy was baptized on Sunday afternoon, December 4, 1938, by Reverend Underwood in Silver Lake, adjacent to the church.<sup>23</sup> On January 15, 1939, the St. John's Baptist Association, in conjunction with the Peniel Baptist Church, ordained Billy as an evangelist. According to Underwood, "it was the only way he could be ordained because he had no church. As a Baptist you must have a church or be ordained as an evangelist. Well his calling was to evangelism so that was the proper way to be ordained." As a result of these important milestones in his life, Florida was always a special place for Billy Graham, and he came back to the state many times over the years.

After his first tour of Europe with Youth for Christ following World War II, Billy returned to Florida in January 1949, to hold a crusade at the Bay Front Auditorium in Miami. Seventy-five churches in Dade County and South Florida cooperated, placing banners across the Miami streets and placards on all the buses. The meetings began in the Allapata Baptist Church where they continued for a week. By the second week the crowds were too large for the church, and it was necessary to move the services to the Miami Civic Auditorium at Bayfront Park.<sup>24</sup> It was estimated that approximately 35,000 attended the meetings, with about 950 "making decisions." During January and February 1953, Billy spent two months preaching in Tallahassee, St. Petersburg, Tampa, and Miami. On May 17-20, 1960, he addressed the 10,000 messengers to the Southern Baptist Convention in the Miami Beach Convention Hall.<sup>25</sup> On December 1, 1960, Billy was invited by newly-elected President John Kennedy to visit him in Palm Beach to play golf.<sup>26</sup> The death of Kennedy's son, however, postponed the visit until January 16, 1961.<sup>27</sup> These events produced a relationship between the two men that included discussions on religion.

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23. This property has been donated to the Peniel Baptist Church by Mrs. Theo M. Livré and her sister, Mrs. Lilly L. Brinson.

24. Interview with Ira Eshelman, February 10, 1977, tape (OH280) and transcript at Billy Graham Center.

25. "Messengers" are delegates in the Southern Baptist Convention.

26. Des Moines, Iowa, *Tribune*, December 1, 1960.

27. *Lakeland Ledger*, January 17, 1961.

In 1961, Graham planned to spend four months in Florida, and moved his family to 2506 Ocean Drive, Vero Beach. Mrs. Graham remained in Vero Beach where the children attended school, while Billy traveled around the state holding meetings: the Jacksonville Coliseum, January 14-15; the Orlando Tangerine Bowl, January 21-22; at Clearwater in Pinellas Stadium, January 28; at Al Lang Field in St. Petersburg, January 29; Hawkins Stadium, Bradenton-Sarasota, February 4; Tampa, Phillips Field, February 5; Florida State University, February 11; and the University of Florida, February 12.<sup>28</sup> The family accompanied him to the major event of the tour— three weeks at the Miami Beach Auditorium, March 5-26, 1961. The crusade was held at the height of the tourist season, and thousands of visitors, native Floridians, Cuban refugees, and students attended.

The mayor of Fort Lauderdale urged Billy to come to his community and address the huge horde of students lolling along the beaches during their Easter holiday break. Billy agreed, and city officials waived restrictions and allowed sound trucks to ride through the streets announcing the meeting. High school students were dismissed from their classes so that they could attend also. At the beach a large flatbed truck was used as a platform. Anita Bryant sang, and Billy preached for more than an hour. He later said that he had never had such an attentive audience, “the only thing you could hear was the lapping of the sea behind. All I did was talk about Jesus.”<sup>29</sup>

Billy attended ceremonies marking the twenty-fifth anniversary of his graduation from Florida Bible Institute held at the Jack Tar Harrison Hotel in Clearwater on January 23, 1965. A souvenir brochure, *The Bible School Days of Billy Graham*, was issued for the occasion. He addressed the Baptist World Alliance in Miami on June 26, 1965, and the National Council of Churches in Miami Beach on December 6, 1966. Three years later, he was the featured speaker at Bibletown, the Bible Conference Center, in Boca Raton, which had been established by his friend, Ira Eshelman. On December 28, 1969, he was a guest and spoke at the Miami Rock Festival, and on January 1, 1970, he offered a prayer at the Orange Bowl football game. He spoke at the Easter sunrise service on April 2, 1972, at the Miami Marine Stadium in

28. *St. Petersburg Times*, Florida, January 7, 1961.

29. John Pollock, *Billy Graham* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1967), 234.



Key Biscayne. In September of that year, Billy, Governor Reubin Askew, and other dignitaries gathered at the Lake Swan Conference to commemorate its fifty years of ministry in Florida and to honor the Reverend John Minder.

Jacksonville University honored Billy at its spring commencement, April 22, 1973, and he delivered the main address and received an honorary degree. His son-in-law was a member of the graduation class. The following year, on February 3, 1974, Billy preached at the Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church in Fort Lauderdale. On April 28, 1976 in St. Petersburg, at a banquet honoring Dr. Watson on his seventy-fifth birthday, Billy addressed some 1,200 people.<sup>30</sup> The occasion was sponsored by the entire constituency, including all the alumni.

Billy visited Florida on other occasions that did not include preaching or speaking. Richard Nixon invited Billy on several occasions to visit him at his home on Key Biscayne. On August 8, 1968, Billy attended the Republican party convention in Miami and offered the closing benediction. It was rumored that he was asked by Nixon for his opinion regarding the vice-presidential nominee, but his suggestion was not the one taken by the president-elect.<sup>31</sup> On August 12, 1969, Billy led a private worship service for Nixon in his Key Biscayne home.<sup>32</sup>

Beginning on March 21, 1979, Billy spoke on four successive occasions during the Tampa Crusade.<sup>33</sup> The average nightly attendance was 35,000, with 52,000 at the closing meeting on Sunday afternoon. The Reverend Earl Hartman, pastor of Tampa's Davis Islands Community Church, said, "This has been a great transformation of a football stadium into a sanctuary of God. The closing Sunday attendance of 52,000 was the largest crowd ever to participate in a religious event in the history of Florida."<sup>34</sup>

Billy Graham continues to visit and to work in this state in which his career as a world-famous evangelist began.

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30. Trinity Bible College banquet tape.

31. Greenfield, Massachusetts, *Recorder Gazette*, August 9, 1968. Billy also gave the invocation at the Democratic convention in Chicago on August 8, 1968.

32. *Evangelical Beacon*, XLII (August 12, 1969), 23.

33. *Tampa Times*, March 20, 1979.

34. Billy Graham Evangelistic Association press release, March 27, 1979.