

William Ashley Sunday Biography

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Biography

The fame of American evangelist William Ashley Sunday (1862-1935) rests on his reputation as an immensely popular revivalist preacher. His fiery platform style differed dramatically from the dignified manner of his predecessors.

Billy Sunday was born in Ames, Iowa, on Nov. 18, 1862. His father, a Civil War soldier, died a month later. Poverty, hard work, and orphans' homes all figured in Sunday's early life. By the age of 14 he was on his own, drifting from job to job, even serving as janitor in a high school so that he could attend classes. While clerking in Marshalltown, Iowa, Sunday began to play baseball on the local team; this led ultimately to his employment with the Chicago White Sox (1883) and later the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia teams. During these years Sunday married and embraced Christianity. Before his departure from baseball in 1891, he was widely known as a Christian ballplayer in a game not then noted for the high moral character of all its participants.

Sunday next worked for the Young Men's Christian Association in Chicago, later assisted the well-known evangelist J. Wilbur Chapman, and in 1896 embarked on his own ministerial career. He was licensed to preach in 1898 and ordained by the Chicago Presbytery in 1903. Combining musical spectacle with harsh rebukes to sinners and backsliders, Sunday rapidly became famous as he induced tens of thousands to "hit the sawdust trail" (walk down the sawdust-strewn aisles of his tabernacle, publicly declaring themselves for Christ). He especially captivated his audiences with his baseball allusions, such as throwing an imaginary baseball at the congregation while exhorting them to "put it over the plate for Jesus."

Fundamentalist in outlook, Sunday viewed Sabbath-breaking and alcohol as the gravest social problems besetting modern society. Among his other achievements, he was significant in bringing about prohibition. The peak of his career came between 1910 and 1920 as he staged massive rallies in cities across the nation, spread his message in such works as *Burning Truths from Billy's Bat* (1914) and *Great Love Stories of the Bible and Their Lessons for Today* (1917), and reportedly amassed a fortune.

Less idolized in the 1920s, he lived out his declining years in Winona Lake, Ind. On Nov. 6, 1935, he died of a heart attack. He had stirred the religious enthusiasm of thousands of Americans and had buttressed the conservative religious and social attitudes of many fundamentalists.