

# Christian History Corner: From Beer to Bibles to VBS

*How America got its favorite summer tradition*

Steven Gertz | posted 6/01/2003 12:00AM

Christianity Today<sup>1</sup>

"... Unofficially, it's possible to trace the roots of VBS as far back as the 1870s, when the Methodist Episcopal Church offered summer Sunday school institutes to the general public near Lake Chautauqua, New York. In 1873, Bishop John H. Vincent proposed the movement should include educational and cultural programs, and soon other Christian groups across the country followed suit with their own summer retreats, many of them offering services for children.

Vacation Bible school as we know it today got its start more than 20 years later on New York City's East Side. Mrs. Walker Aylette Hawes of the Epiphany Baptist Church noted a rapid increase in the number of immigrant children in the slums. In July 1898 she rented the only place available—a saloon—to run a Bible school for six weeks during the summer. Hawes structured her program around worship music, Bible stories and Scripture memorization, games, crafts, drawing, cooking, etc. The school caught on: Hawes was presiding over seven separate schools by the time she retired from her work in 1901.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Robert Boville, who worked for the Baptist Mission Society, picked up where Hawes left off, and the movement grew to include 17 schools by 1903. Four years later, schools opened in Philadelphia and Chicago, and in 1911, Boville established the Daily Vacation Bible School Association as a national organization. In 1923, he left to promote VBS internationally and founded the World Association of Vacation Bible Schools.

If Boville is responsible for establishing VBS as a movement, Standard Publishing in Cincinnati takes the credit for popularizing it. The publisher created a full-scale VBS program in 1923, divided it by grade level in 1948, introduced a single-theme concept in 1952, and by 1987, offered more than 120 tools for churches wanting to run a VBS. In 1998, the publisher reported that more than 5 million children attended VBS programs every year.

It's interesting to note that VBS is not only an American phenomenon. One of many worldwide examples is the VBS pioneered by the South India Bible Seminary. In 1952, the seminary's staff and students introduced VBS to 75 children in Kovilpatti, Tamil Nadu. Four years later, seminary students designed their own course, and in 1961, over 33,000 students enrolled in

100 VBS centers across the country of India. Explosive growth continued through the 1970s, totaling 1,420,000 students by 1980. The Mar Thoma church became so enthusiastic it sponsored a missionary VBS venture into Kuwait in 1984, beginning with 750 students and 60 teachers.

In the 1970s, critics suggested the movement had exhausted its potential. History, it seems, is on the side of VBS."



[Choose Your VBS Program Here](#)

<sup>1</sup> excerpt taken from: Gertz, Steven. "Christian History Corner: From Beer to Bibles to VBS" Christianity Today June 1, 2003. <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2003/juneweb-only/6-30-43.0.html>> accessed January 9, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> Everyday Bible School at the Epiphany Baptist Church, New York City, 1904 image "Inventory to the Homer Grice Papers AR. 795-576" Southern Baptist Historical Archives. <<http://www.sbhla.org/downloads/795-576.pdf>> accessed January 9, 2011.

For Quad Image Links

History of VBS, [http://g.christianbook.com/g/home\\_page/VBS History 1.pdf](http://g.christianbook.com/g/home_page/VBS%20History%201.pdf)