

= George Went Hensley =

George Went Hensley (May 2 , 1881 ? July 25 , 1955) was an American Pentecostal minister best known for popularizing the practice of snake handling . A native of rural Appalachia , Hensley experienced a religious conversion around 1910 : on the basis of his interpretation of scripture , he came to believe that the New Testament commanded all Christians to handle venomous snakes .

Hensley was part of a large family that had moved between Tennessee and Virginia , before settling in Tennessee shortly after his birth . Following his conversion , he traveled through the Southeastern United States , teaching a form of Pentecostalism that emphasized strict personal holiness and frequent contact with venomous snakes . Although illiterate , he became a licensed minister of the Church of God (Cleveland , Tennessee) in 1915 . After traveling through Tennessee for several years conducting Church of God @-@ sanctioned services , he resigned from the denomination in 1922 . Hensley was married four times and fathered thirteen children . He had many conflicts with his family members because of his drunkenness , frequent travels , and inability to earn steady income , factors cited by his first three wives as reasons for their divorces .

Hensley was arrested in Tennessee on moonshine @-@ related charges during the Prohibition era and sentenced to a term in a workhouse , from which he escaped and fled the state . Hensley traveled to Ohio , where he held revival services , though he and his family rarely stayed long in one location . He established churches , known as the Church of God with Signs Following , in Tennessee and Kentucky . His services ranged from small meetings held in houses to large gatherings that drew media attention and hundreds of attendees . Although he conducted many services , he made little money , and he was arrested for violating laws against snake handling at least twice . During his ministry , Hensley claimed to have been bitten by many snakes without ill effect , and toward the end of his career , he estimated that he had survived more than 400 bites . In 1955 , while conducting a service in Florida , he was bitten by a snake and became violently ill . He refused to seek medical attention and died the following day . Despite his personal failings , he convinced many residents of rural Appalachia that snake handling was commanded by God , and his followers continued the practice after his death . Although snake handling developed independently in several Pentecostal ministries , Hensley is generally credited with spreading the custom in the Southeastern United States .

= = Early life = =

Hensley told his children he was from West Virginia and that his family 's roots were in Pennsylvania . In reality , his family lived in Hawkins County , East Tennessee , in 1880 , the year historian David Kimbrough argues Hensley was born . One of 13 children , Hensley lived in Tennessee in Hawkins County and Loudon County in the 1880s . His family lived in Big Stone Gap , Virginia , in the 1890s , and there he witnessed an elderly woman handle a snake during a revival service at a coal mining camp . His mother and sisters were very religious , and he was reared a Baptist .

Hensley left the Baptist church in 1901 , the year he married Amanda Winniger . The couple moved to her brother 's 400 @-@ acre (1 @.@ 6 km2) farm in Ooltewah , where they lived in a shack . Hensley worked in local ore mines , helped in his brother @-@ in @-@ law 's lumber business , and was involved in making moonshine , a common practice in the region . Hensley experienced a conversion while attending a Holiness Pentecostal Church of God service in Ooltewah , led by an evangelist 's teenage son . He forsook alcohol , tobacco , and friendships with those he deemed " worldly " .

= = Ministry = =

Hensley was initially content following his experience at the Church of God , but he began to question whether he was living a sufficiently righteous life . He became fixated on a passage in the Gospel of Mark (Mark 16 : 17 ? 18 , KJV : " And these signs shall follow them that believe ; In my

name ... They shall take up serpents " which suggested that Christians might take up " serpents " without injury . Psychologists Ralph W. Hood and W. Paul Williamson , as well as one of Hensley 's children , have proposed that his preoccupation with this verse arose from a childhood memory of witnessing snake handling in Virginia . Hensley later recalled that he began to doubt his salvation and withdrew to a nearby hill to pray and seek God 's will . In a 1947 newspaper interview , he claimed to have seen a snake while walking on the hill . He said that he knelt in prayer , took hold of it , then brought it to his church and told the congregation to also prove their salvation by holding the snake .

Hensley 's first experience with snake handling occurred between 1908 and 1914 , after which he held snake @-@ handling services in parts of rural Tennessee . His supporters later asserted that a revival broke out at the start of his ministry , a claim considered dubious by historians . At first , the Church of God did not object to his snake @-@ handling services , and , in 1914 , he held a snake @-@ handling meeting with a Church of God bishop in Cleveland , Tennessee . The next year , Hensley applied to be licensed as a Church of God minister , but required his wife 's assistance to complete the paperwork owing to his illiteracy . He had memorized some Bible verses but also stated that he received divine revelation while speaking . After being licensed , Hensley held Church of God services throughout Tennessee , including revival services at church general assemblies . He preached about the Baptism of the Holy Spirit , a Pentecostal teaching that referred to an additional spiritual experience after conversion . His ministry was often mentioned in Church of God newsletters , and his wife Amanda contributed an article about him . In the 1910s , Hensley is thought to have led churches in Grasshopper Valley (northwest of Cleveland , Tennessee) ; Cleveland ; and Birchwood , Tennessee .

Hensley was short , normally soft @-@ spoken , and friendly with churchgoers . Most attendees at his services were miners or farmers from the Appalachian Mountains ; congregants typically arrived at services on horseback or in a Ford Model A. Many were from Holiness Pentecostal backgrounds , but unfamiliar with the snake @-@ handling practice . Hensley 's sister Bertha , who lived in Ohio , was also a licensed minister with the Church of God . In 1922 , he conducted services with her in Ohio . Around that time , more articles documenting his ministry were published in the denomination 's newsletter , and by the early 1920s snakes were regularly handled in Church of God services .

= = = Resignation and return to ministry = = =

In 1922 , Hensley resigned from the Church of God , citing " trouble in the home " . His resignation marked the zenith of the practice of snake handling in the denomination . He separated from Amanda around this time , possibly owing to his temper or drunkenness . Arrested on moonshine @-@ related charges in 1923 , he was sentenced to four months in jail and fined \$ 100 . (This occurred during the Prohibition Era , when alcohol production and consumption were illegal in the U.S.) In lieu of jail time , he was permitted to serve the sentence at the Silverdale workhouse . He was initially placed on a chain gang constructing roads , but the guards found him likable and gave him other assignments . After being sent to a nearby well for water , Hensley fled and evaded recapture , possibly by hiding in the mountains near his sister 's farm in Ooltewah . While a fugitive , he may have been arrested and released on unrelated charges . He ultimately fled Tennessee to his sister 's house in Ohio .

After arriving in Ohio , Hensley returned to his personal ministry and held services in the area . Because he was illiterate , Bertha would read passages from the Bible during services , after which Hensley would deliver a sermon on a theme drawn from the verses . He also frequently preached on the topic of faith healing during this period . He remained in Ohio for several years , divorcing Amanda in 1926 .

While ministering at a Salvation Army church in Ohio in 1926 , Hensley met Irene Klunzinger . He married her in 1927 , although he was about 25 years her senior . After the wedding , they moved to Washingtonville , Ohio , near one of Hensley 's brothers . There Hensley found employment at a coal mine and Irene gave birth to their first child . They later moved to nearby Malvern , Ohio , where she bore their second child .

In 1932 , Hensley and his family moved to Pineville , Kentucky , after a religious layman , who had seen Hensley handle snakes in Chattanooga , entreated him to come to the area . He returned to ministry and built the Pineville Church of God . Hensley established the church himself and characterized it as a " free Pentecostal " church . He continued to move frequently , a practice which Thomas Burton of East Tennessee State University attributes to " wanderlust " . In July 1935 , Irene gave birth to a child in Pennington Gap , Virginia , and a month later , they were living in St. Charles , Virginia , while Hensley performed snake @-@ handling services in the area . He successfully drew crowds to his preaching . In Norton , Virginia , 500 people attended an event , although that service was thrown into disarray after a boy in the audience killed one of the snakes . In 1936 , Hensley built a house on the back of a trailer truck and drove to Florida to hold revival services . By March 1936 , he had reached Tampa , Florida , where he drew over 100 people to a snake @-@ handling service . He traveled to Bartow , Florida , where over 700 people attended one of his tent meetings . He subsequently ministered in Bloomingdale , Florida , before traveling north to Barrow County , Georgia , in late April . During a service in Barrow , a young agricultural worker was bitten by a snake and became ill . Hensley spoke to reporters and claimed that the man was bitten because he was " not quite ready for the demonstrations of the power " . He predicted that the young man would miraculously recover , but the man died . This was the first death by snakebite to occur at one of Hensley 's services . He conducted the man 's funeral and left the area for fear of prosecution . His conduct was condemned by a local newspaper .

Hensley traveled to Ohio to bring one of his sons to live with a sister of Irene while attending school . Hensley then returned to Pineville , where he worked as a railroad conductor and pastored the East Pineville Church of God . He was arrested for handling snakes and moved to Knoxville , Tennessee , in 1939 . He subsequently bought a farm near Knoxville .

= = = Ministry in Tennessee and final years = = =

Hensley lived in Tennessee until at least late 1941 . He then moved to Evansville , Indiana , after separating from Irene . After a brief stay in Pineville , Hensley returned to Ooltewah in 1943 . There he stayed with family members and held religious services . Snake handling had lost popularity since the late 1920s and groups that promoted nontrinitarianism had become popular . Various churches in the area barred those who practiced snake handling from membership .

In 1943 , Raymond Hayes , a young adherent of Hensley 's teachings , arrived in the Ooltewah area and began successfully preaching about snake handling . Hensley and Hayes started a church together in 1945 , which they named the " Dolly Pond Church of God with Signs Following " . Later in 1945 , a member of the church was bitten by a snake and died . The members of the church continued to handle snakes at services , including at the funeral of the man who died from snakebite . The man 's death was viewed as ordained by God to test the faith of the congregants , and to demonstrate to non @-@ believers that the snakes they handled were , in fact , dangerous . That year , Hensley was arrested for snake handling in Chattanooga , Tennessee . He was given a \$ 50 fine , which he refused to pay even when threatened with a workhouse sentence . He was released after members of his church appealed to authorities .

Hensley continued to travel around Tennessee , receiving a mixed reception from those who were aware of his past . Some who knew him were willing to forgive him and welcome him back in a ministerial role , but he remained estranged from most of his family . His son Roscoe saw him preach in 1944 . The younger Hensley was also a pastor by then , but had never seen his father conduct a service .

In 1946 , Hensley married for the third time , but his wife , Inez Hutcheson , left him after less than a year of marriage . After their separation , Hensley began to preach in Chattanooga . During services , he began asserting that he had been miraculously healed after being paralyzed for a year following a coal @-@ mining accident . Kimbrough disputes his claim , noting that there is no one @-@ year gap in the records of Hensley moving or actively ministering . Hensley continued to live in Chattanooga until the early 1950s ; he moved to Athens , Georgia , in the early to mid @-@ 1950s .

= = Personal life = =

Hensley was the father of eight children with his first wife , Amanda . They separated in 1922 . One of their children claimed that the separation occurred after an incident in which Hensley became drunk and fought a neighbor . Amanda left the area and found work in a Chattanooga hosiery mill but soon became ill and bedridden . Hensley 's sister and brother @-@ in @-@ law traveled to Chattanooga to care for her .

Hensley had five children with his second wife , Irene . She was from a prosperous Lutheran family of German descent but believed that she was suffering a curse . She and her family had hoped that Hensley could free her from the curse , but ultimately felt that he was unable to . The marriage was contentious because of Hensley 's frequent unemployment and poor treatment of Irene . He found intermittent work , including bricklaying , but Irene 's family had to help support them ; her mother provided the family with clothing . After seven years of marriage , Irene left Hensley and returned to her family , although she returned to Hensley and reconciled with him . One of their sons recalled that Irene was much more religious than Hensley , whom he claims only spoke about spiritual matters if there were church leaders present . Hensley was again separated from Irene around 1941 . The cause of the estrangement is unknown , although one of their sons claimed that she threatened to have him arrested . She reconciled with him after he promised to find steady employment , and they returned to Pineville with their children . Hensley wanted to put their children in an orphanage so Irene could travel with him , but she refused . After a visit from her sister , Irene again left him ; she and her children went to live with Hensley 's children from his first marriage . A divorce was granted in 1943 . Irene later died of complications following surgery for goiter . Hensley attended the wake and visited his children , but departed without them and did not return .

Hensley met Inez Hutcheson , a widow with ten children , in 1946 while performing a service in Soddy @-@ Daisy , Tennessee . After Hensley spoke with her , she accepted the doctrine of snake handling . He soon proposed marriage , which she accepted . They lived in the Soddy @-@ Daisy area for several months . Although he had hoped that she would travel with him and read Bible passages during his services , she left him after less than a year of marriage , and their union was soon dissolved . In 1951 , Hensley married Sally Norman in Chattanooga . After their marriage , she traveled with him as he ministered in Tennessee and Kentucky .

= = Death = =

In early July 1955 , Hensley began a series of meetings near Altha , Florida . He conducted the meetings without snakes for three weeks , before procuring a 5 @-@ foot (1 @.@ 5 m) snake and bringing it to a Sunday afternoon service on July 24 . Several dozen people gathered at an abandoned blacksmith shop for the observance . During the service , Hensley loudly delivered a sermon on the topic of faith . He removed the snake from the lard can in which it was stored , wrapped it around his neck , and rubbed it on his face . He walked around the audience while preaching and then returned the snake to the can . As he placed the snake into the can , it bit him on his wrist . After a few minutes , Hensley became visibly ill , experiencing severe pain , a discolored arm , and hematemesis . He refused medical attention , although he remained in pain and was urged to seek treatment both by congregants and the Calhoun County Sheriff . One eyewitness claimed that Hensley attributed his suffering to the congregation 's lack of faith , although his wife Sally stated that she believed it was the will of God . Hensley died early the next morning . Calhoun County Judge Hannah Gaskin ruled his death a suicide .

Hensley 's relatives traveled from Tennessee to Florida for his funeral , at which a country music band played . He was buried two days after his death at a cemetery 2 miles (3 @.@ 2 km) from the blacksmith shop where he was bitten . After the funeral , some of the congregants met and declared their intention to continue handling snakes . Sally resolved to continue spreading her late husband 's teachings , saying after the incident that she had not lost " an ounce of faith " .

= = Theology = =

Hensley 's theology , with the exception of his snake handling , was typical of other fundamentalist Pentecostal churches . His teachings on personal holiness bore a resemblance to doctrines of the Wesleyan Holiness tradition . In his sermons he condemned a number of practices as sinful , including gambling , consuming alcohol , wearing lipstick , and playing baseball .

The 17th and 18th verses in chapter 16 of the Gospel of Mark , the " longer ending " of disputed authenticity , formed the core of Hensley 's justification of snake handling and other miraculous activities (he also drank poison in some services , including strychnine and battery acid) . He interpreted the passage as a command , rather than an observation of events that occurred in the lives of some Apostles , as Christians have traditionally interpreted the verses . By handling snakes , he saw himself as part of a continuing tradition that originated in a New Testament injunction . He upheld the ability to handle venomous snakes without harm as proof of salvation and evidence of steadfast faith , linking the practice to speaking in tongues . To him , snake handling was a modern @-@ day confirmation of God 's power to supernaturally deliver people from harm . He often cast snakes as a representation of the Devil and interpreted the legal difficulties he encountered as religious persecution . He labeled those who rejected the observance of snake handling " unbelievers " .

= = Legacy = =

Many writers have attempted to designate one person , often Hensley , as the progenitor of Appalachian religious snake handling . Although these writers have emphasized Hensley 's role in propagating the practice , Kimbrough notes that claims that he originated it are usually unsubstantiated by research , and the origins of the observance are unclear . Hood and Williamson argue that the beginnings of Pentecostal snake handling rites cannot be ascribed to a single person , and that the observance arose independently on multiple occasions . There is no doubt among historians , however , that Hensley helped spread Pentecostal snake handling throughout the Southeast , and that media coverage of Hensley 's ministry was influential in prompting various churches to include the practice in their services .

Media coverage of the movement has focused on popular leaders , such as Hensley , and the deaths of ministers by snakebite have received particular attention . Practitioners of snake handling continue to view Hensley as a great man . Kimbrough recorded a discussion with an advocate of snake handling who dismissed Hensley 's personal failings as slanderous fabrications . His advocacy , leadership , and ? in particular ? his personal charisma were important factors in the advancement of the movement .

= = Endnotes = =