

A 100-year old holly tree and a church that refuses to fade away

A gentle rain was falling when we left for the birthday celebration. It was not a blowing rain, but it was cold, for it was just an hour before dark last Christmas Eve, and such rain is always bone-chilling in the winter. This would be our first experience at this kind of celebration, and there were others waiting when we pulled up in front of the fence.

Some things can be cancelled, but it just did not seem right that a little rain should keep us from having the celebration. After all, how often does any living being, human or otherwise, make it a hundred years? No, the celebration would go on as planned. We opened the front gate and walked slowly toward the guest of honor while singing "Joy to the World."

We sang around our guest of honor, and our song leader led us in "Oh Holy Night" as the day faded into twilight. We forgot about the rain or ignored it, for the very spirit of Christmas engulfed us all, and we were surrounded by a remarkable form of beauty that rose upward toward the heavens. The rain could not dampen our spirits or take the joy from the occasion. Who can lightly stunt aside a birthday that marks a full century?

Now, let us take this strange happening from the beginning and return to it later. Our grandfather, Francis Wright, was first, last, ever, and always a Baptist. He was a member of the Bogueloosa Baptist Church all his life, but that needs a little clarification because a lot of the history of our valley is centered around this church and its earlier members.

The church of grandpa's early years was a log structure on the "Bergamot Trail," a wagon road that ran up Church Branch to the long, level hollow between the hills until it joined what is now the Brightwater road, just above the Busby Spring. That structure lasted until after the Civil War, but it had deteriorated so badly that a new church was built on the Kellytown (Land) to Bogueloosa (Needham) road. That structure, which was also of logs, lasted until 1906 when it began to fall apart.

Grandpa had purchased the first buggy that Mr. Jasper Owen built in his industrial complex on Long Creek below Camp Springs. Mr. Owen died in 1896, but the sawmill part



of the complex was still sawing lumber. Grandpa suggested to the congregation that they purchase lumber from the complex and build a new church near the cemetery.

The congregation did purchase the lumber, but it was rough and unplanned. They planed the lumber by hand and built a new church where the present structure now stands. Please understand that the structure that is there now is not the church that was built in 1906. The present structure was erected in 1938. However, let us go back now to Christmas Eve, 1906.

Grandpa was hunting that evening on Bogueloosa Creek, about a half mile east of the church. It had been a very rainy week, and the creek had overflowed its banks for several days. The water had undercut a part of the western bank, causing it to cave. Grandpa noticed a clump of dirt that had fallen from the bank into the edge of the creek. A small holly tree, about a foot in height, was growing in the clump of dirt.

Realizing that the little tree might grow for a few years and provide a good shade in the treeless cemetery, he pulled the holly from the clump. It was too late to walk home for a shovel, so he took the holly to the cemetery and dug a hole in the soft soil with his bare hands. The tree flourished through the years and is now over thirty feet tall. It is especially beautiful during the Christmas period because its barriers glow like fire.

When we were in the throes of chemotherapy

last, Eric and Beth Wright often visited us at Anderson's Hospital. Our grandpa was their great grandpa, so we told them about his experiences with the holly. In the exuberance of youth, they planned a celebration for the tree on Christmas Eve. They invited everyone, even a couple of undertakers. Neither of them showed up, and we don't blame them. We are afraid of graveyards after dark, so why should undertakers be any braver? The celebration went well, and we will return to it shortly.

Bogueloosa Baptist has had some interesting evangelists and visitors through the years. In 1910, the music publisher of Dallas, Mr. R.E. Winsett, conducted a two week singing school at the church. He was returning to Dallas after a trip to Tennessee where he tried to purchase the copyright for "When I see the Blood" from the Foote Brothers. They gave Mr. Winsett permission to use the song in his song books with a notation: "Not copyrighted. Let no one do so. May this song ever be free to be published for the Glory of God."

If you have the song in your church hymnal, it probably still carries that notation, especially if the hymnal is old. The song is based in part upon Exodus 12 where Moses is instructed by God to command the Children of Israel to sprinkle the blood of an unblemished lamb upon the side posts and doorposts of their dwelling. The children of Israel are in bondage in Egypt. The first born of every house and even of the beast will be struck down that night by God.

Consider the benefit of the blood: "And the Lord will pass over the door, and will not suffer the destroyer to come into your house and smite you." The Foote Brothers extended the theme of the lamb's blood to the blood of the Christ to create a beautiful song.

Grandpa went to the Concord Baptist Church in Yantley in 1914 to hear Dr. David Bryan who was holding a revival in the home church, shortly before his scheduled departure for the Shantung province of China. When his departure was held up for a few weeks because of World War I, Dr. Bryan and his new bride went to Healing Springs near Millry for a few days of rest. Grandpa learned when they would be on the "doodle bug" on their return trip to Lisman. He



The century-old holly (foreground) grows in the cemetery of Bogueloosa Baptist Church

went onto the train when it stopped in Needham and persuaded Dr. Bryan and his wife to come to Bogueloosa Baptist and hold a revival. The Bryans stayed with grandpa and he took them to Yantley in his buggy after the revival.

Shortly after the present church was completed in 1938, two young skilled musicians and their group came to Bogueloosa Baptist and staged a gospel concert. They were unknowns at the time and billed themselves as Lester and Earl. All those in attendance expressed the opinion that the youngsters would "go somewhere." Indeed, they did, and started using their full names; Lester Platt and Earl Scruggs.

What happened to Bogueloosa Baptist? How did it go from a "standing room" only church on Sunday morning to its presently almost inactive status? Demographics, the science of the distribution and density of people provides the answer. The outward view shows that the population of the Bogueloosa Valley has been in a free-fall since the early 1940's because of the outward movement of people and the death of many who did not move.

The inward view shows a sharp decline in the birth rate. Families are now mostly composed of two or three children, not ten or twelve as in generations past. In recent

decades, the death rate has greatly exceeded the birth rate. All the members of Bogueloosa Baptist either moved away or died, and they left no replacements.

Even so, Memorial and homecoming services will be observed on the fourth Sunday, May 27. Brother Russell Wray will conduct the morning service, and there will be singing in the afternoon. Mr. and Mrs. Stan Wright will provide both music and singing. Stan is the mayor of Bayou La Batre where he leads a valiant effort to restore the city from the ravaging effects Katrina. Other singers from the Lusk Baptist Church will be singing. We hope that you will join us.

Now, let us go back to that birthday celebration. We enjoyed the evening very much, and were especially pleased that Mrs. Christine Turner could join us. She has had some medical problems during the

past year, but she appears to be doing much better. Our own parents are resting just a few feet away from the holly, and they would gladly have joined us in the singing had it been possible.

Curiosity caused a few people to stop by, so our singers grew somewhat larger. Most interesting, however, was a car that passed by the cemetery several times. It slowed each time without stopping. Perhaps bravery can be in short supply, even on Christmas Eve. Watch that car in a second on its last trip.

The holly found a new life in the cemetery, and its extension has lasted a hundred years. As believers, we hold that the cemetery will provide an exit for us that is eternal.

That slow moving car came by again, and the timid driver yelled --

"Hey, who y'all burying out there?"

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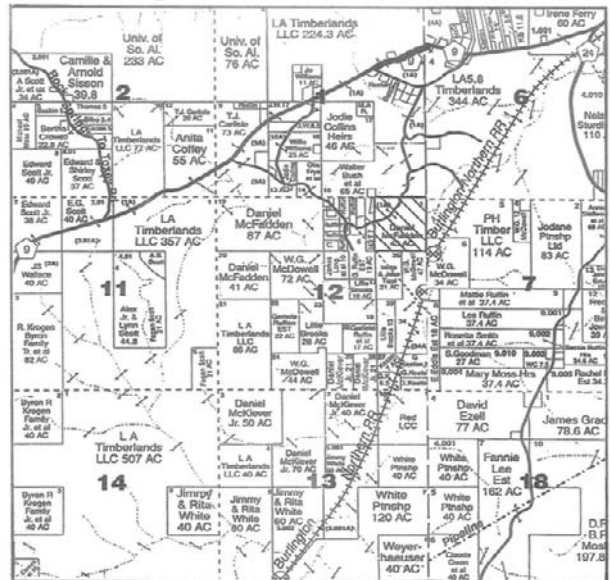
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