

UPPER CUMBERLAND CHURCHES

-A SERIES-

Gentry Methodist 'Most Historic'

Grew From 'Brush Arbor'

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One of the oldest institutions of the Christian religion in the Upper Cumberland is the Methodist camp meeting, the protracted meeting which would draw thousands from miles around for one or two weeks of preaching and singing.

In an earlier article in this series, the history of the Paran Methodist Church, which grew up on a camp meeting round, was outlined. In this article the history of what has been called the "most historic church" of the Upper Cumberland will be traced.

Paran Methodist Church, the subject of an earlier article in this series, sprang up in a camp meeting area. The Pleasant Grove Methodist, called the "most historic church of the Upper Cumberland," had an origin similar to Paran.

Mrs. Charlie B. Ensor, the oldest living member of the Pleasant Grove Church, located in the Gentry community, put together a history of the church in 1975, providing much of the material in this article.

In the days when the church was organized, the Gentry community was in Jackson County. The area where the church took root was long used as a camp meeting ground, where "brush arbors" were erected for worship.

In 1815 a church was organized and called the Rock Springs Episcopal Methodist Church. The name was taken from a long spring which flowed through a crevice in the rocks at the head of the Rock Springs Valley.

The Rock Springs Church had no meeting house, but the congregation would gather in the homes of local families for services.

It was only three years before the organization of the Rock Spring congregation that the Tennessee Conference of Methodists was formed on November 12, 1912. It was a bishop of that conference, Francis Asbury, that was to provide the catalyst for the next developmental move of the Rock Spring Church.

Asbury held a revival on the camp meeting rounds which drew large crowds and generally was considered a success. The people of the Rock Spring Church became ready for a more visible, established church.

So two members of the church, John Boyd and his son, Ephriam, donated land for the construction of a church house, a school and continued camp meetings. The deed was made to the trustees of the Rock Spring Church.

They were Simon Carlisle, Wesley Carlisle, Isaac E. Ferrell, Joseph Jared, Saunders Presley, James Lee Jr. and William Blackburn.

In 1832 the first meeting house for the church was constructed, and the days of home meetings ended.

The new church building was located near several large beech trees, so the congregation changed the name of the church from Rock Spring to Pleasant Grove, referring to the grove of beeches. The church house was located farther down the hill from the present brick structure.

The church continued to grow until toward the end of the 19th century. It was decided that a larger structure was needed. The congregation began a search for land.

In 1898 the church trustees bought a parcel of land on the Old Walton Road, which ran where Highway 70 is today. The land was purchased from R. Byrd and R. Byrd Gentry and Ruth Gentry. Total cost - \$25.

Once again the deed was made to the trustees of the church. At that time they were Joseph Holladay, W. A. Holladay, W. A. Ensor, B. F. Huddleston, W. J. Huddleston, L. T. Leftwich and David Nichols, who was known as a writer of religious books.

An interesting aspect of the 1898 deed is that the notary public seal bears the name of the first man to give land to the congregation – J. A. Boyd.

The church that the congregation constructed was a beautiful structure, and remains so to the present. The church house is constructed with a dark, reddish brick, and features old-fashioned Gothic-style windows with opaque glass that provides part of the illumination of the interior.

The sanctuary does not feature the typical square, uniform of pulpit and pews, but instead as pews set in a curve, like a modern auditorium. Thus arranged, any person seated in the center or side pews can easily see the pulpit without having to turn his head.

To the rear of the auditorium are large folding doors which open onto a kitchen and fellowship area. When opened, the doors expand the size of the sanctuary, making the church building an excellent site for wedding or funerals.

Situated on a hill just off the highway, the church is a very picturesque structure. A person once commented on the building. "It not only is historic, it looks historic!"

Of particular pride to the congregation is the fact that the county's oldest rural Sunday school supposedly started at the Pleasant Grove Church. Another point of pride is the large number of ministers who have come from the Pleasant Grove membership.

Many of the names of those ministers have been associated with the history of other area Methodist congregations. They include John F. Hughes, William Jared, Jasper Nichols, Gideon Bruce, Brice B. Nichols, Wade Jared, Jim Jared and James Allison Holladay.

Others are F. Pierce Jernigan, Dow Ensor, John O. Ensor, Simon M. Ensor, Callie Dickens, Forest Dickens, A. J. Chisolm, Hayden Nichols, Brice Byrne, Byrd Taylor and Ivan DuBois.

Besides donating the first land for the congregation, J. A. Boyd served for 20 years as Sunday school superintendent, working in both the old church building and the present structure.

The Pleasant Grove Church has received much recognition, along with a sister church, the Salem Methodist Church for the large amount of history associated with them.

The earliest recorded preacher for the church was John F. Hughes, who preached there in 1835. Later ones were Simon Carlisle, Gideon Bransford, Alexander Robertson, John Mann, R. G. Erwin, William H. Johnson, Russell Askew and Daniel Jones who was preaching in 1843.

Since those early days, many prominent area Methodist preachers have served the congregation. Currently, Robert Pritchard of Smithville is the pastor.

Among the current leaders of the church are several descendants of the earliest members of the congregation. They include Ralph Jared, Luke Leftwich, Sharon Leftwich Hagard, Ann Jared, Herbie Leftwich, Gary Huddleston and Joleen Hughes.

The Pleasant Grove Church received special attention in the 1925 History of Putnam County by Walter S. McClain.

*See other articles about Pleasant Grove Methodist Church in the history of Putnam County sections at:
<http://www.ajlambert.com>