

HILL'S CREEK BAPTIST CHURCH

Where was Hill's Creek Baptist Church organized? "Under the shade of a white oak tree," came the answer from four former members. Each related the story individually, including members of the John P. Price family at a homecoming in May 1956.

The church minutes from 1885 to 1918 are missing and no one could account for them, but it is known that Hill's Creek Baptist Church was the second church to be organized in Emerts Cove, the first being the Emerts Cove Methodist Church. History of that church tells about a big snow that weighted the roof down and caused damage to the structure.

Under which white oak tree the Hill's Creek Baptist Church was organized is not known, but there was such a tree in the front yard of John and Miranda Price's home. Old timers related that the church was organized in the summer of 1885 under a white oak tree.

It might be assumed that since the John Price family members were active leaders in the early church as well as active leaders in establishing the Sevier County Baptist Association, the organizational meeting for Hill's Creek may very well have been in the John P. Price front yard.

Emerts Cove School, which was a "free" school, standing on the west bank of the Middle Prong of Little Pigeon River about 100 yards north of State Highway 73, served as the first meeting house for the church. How long members continued to meet there for worship is unknown.

Ephriam E. and Nancy Ogle deeded a half acre to the newly organized church for a building site. This was about two-tenths of a mile from the "free" elementary school on the banks of the Middle Prong of Little Pigeon River where the church is presently located.

Again, when inquiry about what time the white frame church was built on Ogle land, the only answer was that "It was there and they were worshipping in it when the big snow came in the 1890s."

Elderly men remembered their fathers telling them how men of the community had to brace the walls inside with wire to keep the roof from collapsing from the weight of the snow.

The history of the building of the frame church was free materials and hand labor from the community but details are scarce. The same white frame church built somewhere between 1885 and 1900 served the congregation until November 1959 when the organization moved into the present block structure. The old building was sold to Conley Huskey and it served as hay storage until it burned in 1973.

The present block building erected in 1957 stands on the exact site of the first building. While Oliver Huskey and Troy Price did much of the labor on block laying, they were joined by many community workers to promote the free labor project.

Construction of the new building began with only \$500 but the project of faith grew as materials and money came in. Bathrooms were built in 1964, another acre and a half bought in 1969, a belfry added in 1970 (using the old bell from the first building), electric heat in 1971, stone laid in 1972, and pews covered, floors carpeted in 1974. Additional classrooms and fellowship hall were added in 1985.

The 1886-87 minutes of the Sevier County Baptist Association reveal that as members of the church, John P. Price, Isham H. Whaley, Reverend John W. Tudor, D. W. James, W. D. Maples, Reverend David Fisher, James Ownby, and Reverend Mark Roberts were active leaders also in the Associational movement. There were 46 members reported in the Hill's Creek 1887 minutes.

Sunday Bible School has been a part of the church's earliest history, dating back to 1887. No Sunday school report was given in the 1886 minutes. The earliest church records indicate Hill's Creek contributed to the Southern Baptist Mission programs. Church records reveal that in early years when a pastor only preached one Saturday afternoon and one Sunday morning each month, many of the pastors were circuit riders, pastoring four to seven churches at one time.

Not until November 1947, did the church move to have preaching twice a month. This included preaching two Sundays per month and the preceding Saturday afternoons at 2:30 p.m. Older members explained that the schedule enabled pastors to preach Saturday afternoon, spend the night in a member's home, and preach again on Sunday.

"We only had two interviews a month way back and any other gatherings for young people at the church had to be accompanied by one of the parents," said an older member.

"Preaching" was often referred to as an "interview." Needless to say, daylight was cheaper than kerosene, which churches relied on until electricity came through the community in 1948. Full time preaching, every Sunday morning and evening, began with Pastor F. W. Wright in 1958.

Church minutes reveal the usage of words now replaced, but as one reads where a motion was made to have "protractive" meetings, one becomes aware that these were "revivals."

Early minutes often describe the sermon as "most interesting," "wonderful," or "great," but a prize-winner for such phrases was, "A short sermon was delivered by pastor and enjoyed by all."

While committees were appointed to clean the church or church ground, the entire church membership cleaned the membership rolls and cleared them of disorderly members. This was common practice in the 1920s and 30s.

Membership remained fairly stable at around 100. Much of Emerts Cove lies in the boundary of the Great Smoky Mountains National Park and during the late 1920s and early 1930s many neighbors and members moved away after selling farms for the National Park cause. This left quite a void in the church ranks.

Naming of the church is a mystery. Why should it be called “Hill’s Creek” Baptist Church when it is located in Emerts Cove on the banks of the Little Pigeon River? No one has been able to come up with an explanation. Apparently, it is a secret now buried with the past.

Written by Glenn Cardwell.