

A Brief History
of
Oak Grove Baptist Church
Compiled and written by W. B. Parsons

With a prelude of
the religious interests and activities in the community
before the church was organized.

Written for the Dedicatory Exercises
of the New Church Building
Completed in 1952
Mimeographed by Oak Grove Church in 1959

Compiled and written
by W. B. Parsons
a former Church Clerk

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The Pastor's Preface

Reading of the manuscript of the Oak Grove Baptist Church which Bro. W. B. Parsons produced has been an enriching experience for me as the present Pastor of the Church. He has made it possible not only for the present elderly membership to appreciate the Church's history, but also for the youth age group to become acquainted with where our church came from and how it got there. Furthermore, a new Pastor or church member will appreciate having a ready reference at hand by which he may decide what the church is and what it may become with the important contribution of his willing dedication to Christ.

Possibly, few people today even in this immediate vicinity appreciate the work Bro. Parsons has done. Here is represented a creditable work in which he has tirelessly gathered materials both oral and recorded for the benefit of generations yet unborn. Because of his willing and unsolicited initiative, Bro. Parsons has left with us a memorial that will continue to be a wholesome and living influence to the future hosts of God's people.

As historian, Bro. Parsons has done an outstanding favor to certain other churches and to the Mud Creek Association. He has written "The history of Mud Creek Association", the histories of Rock Creek, Mud Creek and Big Creek Baptist Churches as well as that of Oak Grove. He has put these in the depository of Howard College for safe-keeping along with copies of the Association minutes from 1885 to 1958 with the exception only of 1889; the Big Creek Church record book from 1847 to 1885; the original Association record book dating from 1878; and the Rock Creek Church minutes dating around 1865-87.

As Pastor I have worked closely with Bro. Parsons during the last half of 1958 to edit, arrange, and organize this brief history from his original manuscript. Thus, this version of the history is produced with his full knowledge and permission. If after reading this history, some of our members feel that there is some additional incidents and episodes that should be included or added to this sketch we would appreciate and welcome any such information. A history committee could be appointed by the Church to write a history larger in scope and content so as to be more representative of the mind of the whole membership.

We are deeply grateful that God has spared for us the servant with his native ability to research, preserve, and write this brief history of Oak Grove Baptist Church. Otherwise, much of this material would have been lost forever.

Charles C. Moore
Pastor, January 1959

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Table of Contents

Chapter

I.	Introduction	1
	This history of the Oak Grove Community	1
II.	Background of the Oak Grove History	5
	The community center of interests	5
	The first white school and church services	6
	The Associational literary school of 1885 at Oak Grove	
	The Associational School became the Jerry Fountain School in 1886 at Oak Grove	
III.	The History of the Church Building and Site	
	The first building program 1881	
	The second building program 1898-1900	
	The third building program 1947-1952	
	The original site and unusual title	
IV.	The Organization of the Church	
	The Charter Members	
	The Church name	
	The Church deacons	
V.	The Progress of the Church Program	
	The young Church and denominational cooperation	
	The controversy of missions and education	
VI.	The Business and Disciplinary Meetings	
	The Saturday conferences	
	Historical Table	

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Foreword

Interesting indeed is the story of this rural church which has been serving God and humanity for these seven decades. She is serving at present the first and the second generations from the Charter Members, none of whom are living now. Furthermore, very few of these two generations remember the organization of the church seventy-four years ago.

This church may not have fully measured up to her opportunities; but in some degree her program measures up, or rather bears witness, to the things which lift humanity high above the level of the animal nature and which give sacredness and dignity to every human being. She has contributed her part toward making living worthwhile in this community. Good churches make good communities. No one would want to live in a community without a church.

Churches like this are the salt of the earth and of our civilization. May this church continue to serve God and humanity until the Lord returns for his own. And may we have his leadership in carrying on his program.

Next to God's forgiveness and his free salvation the second greatest thing that any nation, people, church, or individual can have is his leadership. May the Lord lead us and keep us ever in his will and loving care and protection.

Much of the information for this history was given to me by my maternal grandfather, Starling T. Roberts. At the time he possibly thought I was not much interested. However, many of those incidents I have been able to recall. Other sources of information are cited in the footnotes.

W. B. Parsons

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Chapter I

Introduction

The history of the Oak Grove Community. Before recounting the actual organization of the Christian fellowship now known as the Oak Grove Baptist Church of the Mud Creek Association, it is necessary to consider certain leading personalities as early settlers and prevailing community influences. These activities give the reader a clearer understanding of what the church was to be for a church is and becomes what a community of people make it.

A lengthy introduction is needed in order to show how interest of the community grew for the organization of a church to meet its existing interests and needs. One of the contributing factors to this growing interest was the geographically and centrally located community in territory that embraced the five mother churches which were Mud Creek, Rock Creek, Prudge's (Prude's) Creek, Big Creek, and Smithville (Toadvine).

It is felt conclusive that the oldest settled place in the Oak Grove community was the Bill Higgins place.¹ This site is located in front of W. B. Parsons place on the Mud Creek road. The small patch of ground surrounding this home place was the oldest cultivated land in this community.

Next came W. D. T. Culbertson and wife, Narcissus. They lived just east of the Al Bean and saw mill site. The little mountain to the North of their homestead was named for them. Following them were Wych and Tabitha Goodwin. They lived in the hollow near where Raymond Howton now lives. It is said that the next settler was Theophilus Parsons who lived just in front of where Denton Raney now lives. It is thought perhaps his successive follower was John Brown who lived on the hill beyond the bridge on Valley Creek. The old ford of the creek just below the old bridge was named for him. Also, there is an old ford at the upper end of the bottom above the new bridge which is called the "Old Brown Ford." Other settlers who came later were the following: Ben Raney, Joshua Goodwin, Lorenzo Dow Martin and Jack Parsons.

However the most important homesteader among the early ones of this community was Hewitt Laird (Lard as the sir name was called by the early settlers.) There appears on this page in the original manuscript an inset of the founder and the developer of the beginnings of the Oak Grove community. His first appearance in this locality was at the old Rock Creek Baptist Church in 1836. He rode up at this old church on a gaited stallion. No one knew who he was nor where he came from; and no one knows today where he came from. We know nothing of his ancestors or their whereabouts.

In 1837 he married Miss Mary Cargile of the Liberty community in the western part of the County. They settled at the forks of the River Road and the Mud Creek Road, more specifically known as the Gwin place.

Six children blessed this union. The sons were Felix, Louis and Polk; and the daughters were Talitha, Virginia (Ginnie) and Frances (Frank). Felix died during the Civil War; Louis married a Nancy Mary, and Polk married Mary Cowan. Talitha married M. M. Gwin, Ginnie married Benton Vines and Frank married J. S. Thompson.

His first wife died about 1850. Soon thereafter he married Bekie Burchfield of the Shoal Creek community. Five children blessed this second marriage. These names were Buck and Dave; and the daughters names were Rushie, Ann and Donnie. Buck and Dave were never married. Rushie married Sam Lacy, Ann married Ollis Snow, and Done also married a Snow. This pioneer citizen moved away from the Oak Grove community soon after the close of the Civil War. He moved nearer Old Elyton to the Vinesville community.

As is shown above he died during the summer of 1876. He knew the end was coming and had made arrangements for his funeral. The weather being very hot, the distance 25 miles, and the method of transportation being by ox-wagon, he told his people that it was too hot and far to drag him back to Mud Creek to be buried by his first wife in the old cemetery at this church. His suggestion was that they bury

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Oak Grove Baptist Church
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him in the Bethlehem cemetery near Dolomite. He had selected the 14th chapter of Job as the Scripture reading for his funeral. Thus ended the career of the leader of the early activities and life of the community.²

This biography will stand out prominently as a worthy example of the past, the present, and the future life of this community. He lived, worked and wrought well in the life and the affairs of his day and generation. He was a successful slavery plantation owner and operator. He was, also, a successful merchant and business man.

All the interests and activities that led to the founding of Oak Grove community found their origin around the hub of Hewitt "Lard's" store as center. He came to this community about 1837 or thereabouts and was a slave owner, and in connection with his slavery operations, he set up a General Merchandise establishment, which was known as, "Hewitt Lard's Store." This location was at the forks of the Mud Creek road with the Lock 17 road at the old Gwin place. All roads from the surrounding territory led to this strategically established community center. Besides his General Mercantile store Mr. Laird built and operated at the nearest point on Valley Creek to his residence a wheat mill, a grist mill and a set of wool cards. With these enterprises, he was in position to serve the public patronage well. During the Slavery years, he had provided a meeting house for his slaves to hold their old fashioned "Negro Meetings." However by 1885 this slavery meeting house had been converted into a dwelling by J. M. Hyche, and house the Rural Post Office by the name of Ezra.³ Therefore, holding school sessions and church services were transferred to a vacant dwelling formerly occupied by the Hunter family, and this building come to be known as the Hunter Schoolhouse. It was located on the ridge behind the present parsonage of Oak Grove Church.

- 1 Statement of W. B. Parsons as related by his grandmother and as corroborated by several other residents.
- 2 This biography was related to W. B. Parsons by members of the Laird family.
- 3 Related to Randolph Parsons, the first mail carrier on the route in 1885.

A Brief History
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Chapter II

Background of the Oak Grove Church History

The community center of interest. Mention has already been made of "Hewitt Laird's Store" and its central importance in the community life.⁴ This influence was so significant that the original name of the community was that of "Hewitt Laird's Store."

During every stage of history's civilization, man has desired and sought to worship higher being than himself. Often his adoration took the form of image worship of some god. This was true of the residents in the vicinity of "Hewitt Laird's Store." Whether by purpose or chance, Mr. Laird was instrumentally used by God to instigate true worship of the Supreme Being, and thus to give the needed expression of men's souls.

Being a slave owner, Mr. Laird provided building accommodations so that church services could be had for the benefit of his slaves. This provision was made on the theory that it made better servants out of his colored men and women. Besides, the slaves naturally wanted a place at which they could meet along with those slaves of other owners. The accommodation mentioned above consisted of a building provided with seats and a pulpit. This same old-fashioned pulpit was transferred to and used as part of the church furniture of the first church building occupied by the new congregation. The pulpit will be referred to later. These slaves had their meetings in their accustomed way. However some of them belonged to the white churches of Mud Creek and Big Creek. Memories of those Old Negro Meeting Days have lingered in the minds of that slavery and succeeding generations.

The first white school and church services. It will be seen that the church and school interests began to shape up, laying the foundation for the organization of a new church, as well as for the present consolidated school system which we enjoy today in our community.

After the Civil War the white people came to use this same building provided by Hewitt Laird, for holding school and for church services. J. K. P. Laird, son of Hewitt Laird, taught the first 8 weeks Township school in this building in 1867 when he was only 19 years of age. His prized pupils were Bains Roberts and Bains Waldrop, noted for their spelling proclivity. They could stand up longer in the spelling bee than any other pupil. Later J. H. Moody taught several school sessions in this same building; and it came to be known as the Moody Schoolhouse.⁵

The schools were of meager accommodations and of the township type consisting of one teacher and was conducted for only eight weeks during the summer months. The attendance of one or more of these Township schools was all of the schooling that many of the parents of the present generation had the opportunity of getting.

As was mentioned above the white people held church services infrequently in this same building which was admirable adapted for their purpose. Church services were held here, by appointment, up until about 1878. However, monthly church services were held at the neighboring churches of Mud Creek & Rock Creek.

Later the Moody Schoolhouse was converted into a dwelling and housed the rural U. S. Post Office in this community by the name of Ezra.⁶ This local Post Office did not leave a very lasting impression on the life of the community except for a few of the male babies born at the time who came to bear the name. Oak Grove has no clubs as yet which borrowed the name. In some localities the churches springing up took their names from these rural Post Offices.

About 1878 we find the Township School in this the 18th Township was being conducted, also that church services had been transferred to a vacant dwelling formerly occupied by the Hunter family. Therefore, this building came to be known as the Hunter Schoolhouse. Young William H. Batson (Uncle Bill) was conducting the Township School here in 1881 when this church was organized. And as church services were being held in the Hunter Schoolhouse at that time, some have misunderstood that this

A Brief History
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Oak Grove Baptist Church
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church was organized in a building made ready for that purpose, according to the church leaders of that time. A very few of our present generation have any recollection of the organization which took place seventy-four years ago.

The Associational literary school of 1885. In 1885 the Mud Creek Association established a literary school in the bounds of the Association; and this school was located at Oak Grove, since this was nearest the center of the Association and deemed a suitable and healthy community.

The first Associational School was taught by Rev. O. J. Waldrop. He was employed for a term of eight months at a salary of \$40.00 per month. The Township School funds were used in the support of this school. Therefore, it was in part a State supported school and the tuition basis was about \$1.00 or \$1.50.

H. P. Hudson in his Report on Education for 1885 recommended the establishment of said School. A Board of Trustees was appointed at this same session of the Association to manage the operation of this school.

The following named brethren were appointed Trustees of the school located at Oak Grove, to wit: P. A. Wilkey, J. M. Hyche, M. M. Gwin, J. M. Knight, C. B. Gwin, T. M. Parsons, Andy Gilbert and W. A. Murry.⁷

The following year J. M. Knight, chairman of the committee on education made his report for the trustees. "We, your Board of School of Trustees, beg leave to make the following report: Dear Brethren, we have endeavored to discharge the duties assigned us to the best interest that our judgment served us. First, we employed Rev. O. J. Waldrop as proprietor of said school for a term of eight months at forty dollars per month. We feel that much good has been accomplished. Bro. Waldrop has taught an interesting school, together with Christian principles. Dear Brethren, we have had but little support in this school-only from the surrounding community; and we solicit earnestly all your help in patronage to make this school such as we desire. We have made no selection for a teacher for the coming session. May the Lord bless us in that direction is our prayer."⁸

The first Associational school was conducted in the first boxed church building of Oak Grove Church. The interest of J. M. Knight in education led him to build on his property adjoining that of the church a small log house which served as parsonage for the said Rev. O. J. Waldrop as pastor of Oak Grove Church and as a teacher for the same proprietor of this Associational school.

The Associational school became the Jerry Fountain School. The second session of the Associational School was known as the Jerry Fountain School. By referring to the closing prayer of the School Trustees' Report for 1886, it seems that the coming of Jerry Fountain as principal of this school was the answer to that prayer.

At his coming a two story framed, weather boarded and ceiled building was erected on two acres of ground donated by M. M. Gwin for school purposes. This land joined the church property and was situated where the lodge building stands.

This second Associational School was of renowned interest and importance. Principal Fountain was ably assisted in this school by Miss Bulah Bell who taught the elementary grades in a creditable manner.

Principal Fountain inaugurated a curriculum of studies far in advance of the Township School level. In addition to the Three R's he added the fourth R, recreation. This course of studies included English, History, Latin, Physiology, Algebra and Geometry; and these courses were climaxed by an eager participation in football games at the noon recess each day.

Jerry Fountain was a strict and successful disciplinarian. He held the respect and the admiration of his pupils and the community by his iron-hand rule. While his school did not stress the teaching of Christian principles, as was said of the first such school, he was on the alert to see that none of his pupils fell into moral depravity. He fired the pants of any of them. However, the dwindling number of pupils who attended that school look back upon the time as being an important privilege and experience in their lives. This number is composed of the following people who are living today: Elisha Wilkey, Ellen

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Humber, J. O. Wilkey, Jep Knight, Al Bean, H. R. Goodwin, Steve Edwards, C. T. Crooks, Luke Ray, Georgia Ann Roberts, W. B. Parsons, and possibly others.

This school lasted for six years, namely: 1886-1892.

The patronage of this school was of a much larger range than the first Associational School, covering most of the entire territory embraced by the Mud Creek Association. It was composed of the children of all ages and the young men and women from this and surrounding communities. Then there was a host of boarding pupils from distant communities.

Pupils went out from this school to take their places in the leading vocations of life. Some made lawyers, ministers, teachers, engineers, business men, farmers and home makers.

It is to be regretted that this school could not have been continued. It compared favorable with other schools in this locality at that time. To name these were the celebrated McAdory School Pleasant Hill, McCalla, Ala., in this county and the Letson School at Cottondale in Tuscaloosa County, Ala.

The removal of Howard College from Marion to East Lake absorbed the interest in the continuation of this school in the Mud Creek Association. It may be said that this Associational School was the forerunner of the Consolidated High School at Oak Grove at the present time. About the middle of January 1892, Fountain closed his school at Oak Grove to enter the race for Superintendent of Education against Professor I. W. McAdory, the incumbent in Jefferson. However, he was decisively defeated.⁹

In passing from role of schools in Oak Grove, mention should be made of the Durrett School of 1889 though nothing is known of its having any relationship to the Oak Grove Church. It was taught by Joe Durrett and Dr. Hewitt Johnson states that in February 1889, his two brothers Powell and Flem attended the school. They boarded in the home of John Howton whose children were Luther, Nettie, Mary and George.¹⁰