

With the convening of the 111th Annual Conference of the Methodist Protestant churches of North Carolina in Greensboro last week, an historic event of unusual importance was noted, for at the close of that conference the great Methodist Protestant Denomination in North Carolina definitely passed into history. At this Conference fourteen delegates were selected to represent the denomination at the great uniting conference which convenes at Kansas City, Missouri on April 26, 1939. At which time the larger Methodist Churches of America will be united into one great National Church known simply as the Methodist Church. There will then no longer be a Methodist Protestant Church. Neither will there be a Methodist Episcopal Church nor a Methodist Episcopal Church South. These great and historic church bodies will cease to be a separate denomination and will thence forth become one great Methodist Church.

The North Carolina Conference of Methodist Churches was organized at Whittakers Chapel in Halifax County in December 1828 with 13 members or delegates present and is said to have been the first conference of Methodist Protestant Churches ever to have been held anywhere in the world. From this humble beginning one hundred and ten years ago the denomination has grown in strength and numbers until today the North Carolina Conference is the second largest in America. Under a consistently evangelical and progressive leadership it has wielded an incalculable influence upon the religious and spiritual life of the people of North Carolina. Early known as shouting Methodist who were not ashamed to give open praise in emotional outburst of heartfelt gratitude to God, the true giver of all blessing, the new denomination quite early attracted numerous converts through the State.

Born in an atmosphere of revival when the spirit of democracy and independence was in the ascendency, the freedom from cant and ceremony combined with a strong emotional appeal of an evangelical

ministry, the movement found a ready field among the people of the rural sections of North Carolina seventy five and a hundred years ago. The older denominations were already strongly entrenched in the cities and towns, and the people of the cities generally were not receptive to any new disturbances to their spiritual complacency. Therefore the disciples of the new movement of Methodism struck out for the highways and back country seeking converts where churches were few and congregations small. Lead by men of indomitable will and steadfast purpose fired with a zeal characteristic of the enthusiast no district was too remote, no danger too terrifying, no hardships too trying to discourage these evangelist to the back countries. Having no churches, at the beginning, they held their meetings wherever two or three of the faithful were gathered together. During its Summer season the open air or brush Arbor meetings early suggested the means for forming a congregation.

In this manner the Methodist Protestant Church soon became a recognized power in many rural sections of the South and especially so in North Carolina, Maryland and Alabama. Wherever they went they established churches and opened schools. Sometimes the school house was built on the same lot with the church and sometimes the local minister would also serve as school master. In some localities the church and school became the center of influence.

Wherever churches were established the great event eagerly looked forward to was the annual camp meeting usually held in the late Summer when crops were laid by and work on the farm was not so pressing. When the season for the Annual revival approached preparations were made in advance, in order that all work on the farm, save the most urgent and necessary, might cease and the week or ten days, during which the revival was in progress could be wholly devoted to

regular attendance at the services. Those whose circumstances would permit, moved to the church grounds and camped in log cabins or tents grouped around the church or arbor. Others who could not afford to maintain a tent camped in the open and slept in covered wagons. The business of living in those days was not so complicated as it is today and human requirements were mainly limited to the simple necessities most of which were produced on the farm and when the faithful worshippers repaired to the Church grounds for the period of the revival they took with them from the farm whatever was necessary to make conditions reasonably comfortable.

One of the oldest of these early churches in the vicinity of Denton, was known as Mount Ebal Methodist Protestant Church located about three miles east just off Tom's Creek. At one time five roads converged on the grounds of this popular place of public worship of a half century past. While today only one poorly kept road leads into the Church grounds and cemetery. According to the most reliable tradition the Church at Mount Ebal was founded shortly before the Civil War. Near the present home of G. B. Sexton whose grandfather, William Sexton, was a prominent Church leader of his day. It is believed that the first services were conducted under a large spreading oak near where the present church building now stands. Later a small building was supplied by William Sexton where services were more or less regularly held. William Sexton had five sons and two daughters all of whom were later to be definitely connected with the history of the church. Daniel and James Sexton were among the first trustees. When the congregation had grown somewhat a lot meeting house was built, also a school house known as the Mount Ebal School where a number of subscription schools were taught.

It was not until after the Civil War, however, that the Church

at Mount Ebal reached a state of importance in the life of the community. During the thirty years embracing the period between 1870 - 1900 it was probably one of the most widely attended camp meeting places in Southern Davidson or Randolph County. In 1883 the little log meeting house was replaced by a larger frame building 36' x 48'. The late John T. Sexton, for many years prominent citizen of Denton and the late Alfred Thompson, father of Rev. W. B. Thompson, widely known Methodist Minister, were the contractors, who agreed to do the work of building for the sum of sixty dollars (\$60.00). The building was constructed from native forest pine lumber donated by members and people of the community. The floor and ceiling was planed and matched entirely by hand tools and is today 55 years later in such a perfect state of preservation that it is considered a marvel of workmanship. The seats were also made by hand the ends of which were sawed out by hand from two inch (2") maple boards or lumber. At about the same time a new and larger old time Arbor in which the camp meetings were held was built. The Arbor was stoutly built, framed, raftered and covered with shingles split from the heart of native forest pine. Twenty five or more camp houses both of frame and log construction were built grouped around the Church and Arbor, some large enough to accomodate sleeping quarters for two or more average families.

Early on Sunday morning of the opening day of the Camp Meeting the smoke from the camp fires and from the tent kitchens might be seen rising slowly into the air heralding the approach of a busy and exciting day. Scarcely would the remains of the morning meal be cleared away before a string of wagons, buggies, surries and other vehicles of conveyance would begin pouring in from the five point roads converging at the meeting house. Others might be seen coming

in by foot while troops of horseback riders often followed the wagons and buggies. By ten o'clock the hills and woods around was filled with wagons and other vehicles of varying description. While the neighing of horses and mules stamping and chafing with impatience at the unfamiliar surroundings added to the general feeling of excitement and festivity that was somewhat tempered by a spirit of solemn worshipful purpose.

The church had a rather unique location in harmony with the name Mount Ebal. For it was situated on a hill overlooking a prong or tributary of Tom's Creek. A hedge of huge boulders circled the grounds on two sides, around which, (a few are still standing) were giant oaks typical of the primeval forest.

The Arbor was built not far from the Church to accomodate the great congregations who attended the camp meetings. It was framed, rafted and covered with durable pine shingles with a large stand or platform partly enclosed to accomodate the ministers. An interesting feature in connection with the arbor was the method or manner of lighting the surroundings for the evening services. Only the most primitive methods could be used such as had been known and used for centuries. Huge pine knot fires were lighted on raised fire stands as they were called. These old interesting relics were built of stone constructed somewhat in the manner of the ancient stone altee with a flat surface four or five feet in diameter and three or four feet high. There were four of these, one at each corner of the arbor. On these the blazing pine was piled to shed light over the arbor and surrounding church yard.

Three services were held each day. A morning service at 11:00 A. M., an afternoon service at 3:00 P. M. and an evening service at 7:30 P. M. The evening service perhaps attracted the largest attend-

ance and were often held far into the night.

In addition to the regular circuit rider or pastor there were generally visiting ministers or evangelist present to assist in the services which were often characterized by many conversions sometimes affecting the entire neighborhood. Driven by an ardor and zeal typical of the great revival that swept the country when the Methodist movement was just started. The Methodist Protestant Church at Mount Ebal extended its influence throughout the surrounding country.

Among the early ministers who served the church during the time of its most prosperous years, particular mention is often made of Rev. Pogram, Cicero Harris, LewAllen, Bunch, Lineberry and Modlin. Of course there were many others whose services will be long remembered.

Among the early leaders of the church and who at one time served as trustees we find the names of three of the sons of William Sexton, namely Daniel, James and John. Richard Cranford was another whose name is held in veneration. His home was located near the Church and throughout his life he was closely identified with its history almost from the time it was founded. Allen Morris, also was a leading member as was Nelson Morris, John Thompson and William Gibson. As were a host of others whose names appear on the old church rolls. In the days of the beginning of the church Harris Johnson was often spoken of with respect as the oldest member.

The men whose counsel and advice was sought who helped to shape and direct the moral and spiritual life of an entire community, have all long since passed on to their reward. Only the stone fire stands remain to indicate the site of the old Arbor. Mute evidence of a change which they could not foresee. The tent cabins have long since disappeared. Even the Church yard is overgrown with grass and broomsage. The pulpit is without a preacher, and the benches are

empty on Sunday morning as on all other days but the old church at Mount Ebal is not dead. It has simply gone to town. From it the Methodist Protestant Church at Denton which has the largest membership of any Church in the community has drawn heavily. Many of its charter members were former members of Mount Ebal. And others were drawn from the Church later. Especially the Sexton's, Morrises, Cranfords and Thompson families have added their influence to the Denton church. In addition to the Church at Denton both the church at Canaan and Lineberry were organized by members of the Mount Ebal church. Thus old Mount Ebal continues to live on through the Churches which her members have organized.

Last Summer an all day home coming service was held on the grounds and Rev. W. M. Thompson, whose parents were one time members of the Church, brought the message. At this meeting the Mount Ebal Memorial Association was formed with a president, secretary, treasurer. and board of trustees, whose duty is to keep the old Church building in repair, care for the graves in the cemetery, and collect and preserve historical data concerning the church which may be of interest to future generations.

Now that the Methodist Protestant Church as a denomination will soon pass into history and its traditions submerged by the sheer weight of numbers coupled with a steady march towards a more liberal attitude on the part of the Methodist movement. Mount Ebal may well serve as a memorial linking the past with the present.

by John Oakly Garner
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