

Mt. Ebal History Shared

Mount Ebal Church will hold its annual homecoming on Sunday, June 2, at 11:30 a.m.

This year's speaker will be **Ronnie Robbins**, Principal of South Davidson High School. After his retirement in June, Robbins will be working as administrative director of his local church in Lexington.

The service will be followed by a short business meeting, then dinner on the grounds afterwards.

The following history of Mount Ebal Church was brought to *The Denton Orator* by Stewart Sexton and was written on November 17, 1938, by John Oakley Garner.

by John Oakley Garner

One of the oldest of the 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 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 meeting house was built and also a school house, known as Mount Ebal School, where a number of subscription schools were

(See Mt. Ebal, Page 7)

Wednesday, May 29, 1996

Mt. Ebal

(Continued From Page 1)

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 and 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 the building for the sum of sixty dollars (\$60).

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, rafted 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 grouped around the Church and Arbor, some large enough to accommodate 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 a morning meal be cleared away before a string of wagons, buggies, surreys 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

Subscribe to *The Denton Orator* . . . Call (704) 869-3131

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 accommodate 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 accommodate 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 altar 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 a.m., an afternoon service at 3 p.m. and an evening service at 7:30 p.m. The evening service perhaps attracted the largest attendance and were often held far into the night.

In addition to the regular circuit rider or pastor there were generally visiting ministers or evangelists 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 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. Pegram, Cicero, Harris, Lew, Allen, 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 Sextons, 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 at Lineberry were organized by members of the Mount Ebal church. Thus the old Mount Ebal continues to live on through her Churches which her members have organized.

Last summer, an all-day homecoming 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 it 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 be submerged by 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.