

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

White Oak Grove Church (Part 3)

The exact origin of White Oak Grove Church is unknown. One document that may unlock the mystery is a letter written by Dr. Leo Richard Anderson, MD, resident of California who was reared in Bucklesberry. The letter includes observations and recollections from his mother, Lucille Foss Anderson (1916-2013) and his grandfather, Simon Foss (1873-1955).

Leo claimed that his great-grandfather, Rev. Louis Barkley Foss (1834-1908), an ordained preacher who lived in the Bear Creek area, built a church around 1899. He deeded the land to the church that was eventually sold. Formerly situated on the corner of Bear Creek and Ben F. Herring Roads, the church was later converted to the Pelletier homeplace.

The implication in Leo's letter was that the church built by his great-grandfather may have been the first church site for White Oak Grove. Linking the two does not require a great leap of logic, since Louis "considered himself a Free Will Baptist minister," according to Leo, and White Oak Grove has operated as a Free Will Baptist church from its early years.

Available records confirm Rev. Louis Foss was indeed a preacher of the Gospel. And the existence of the old Pelletier homeplace observed by Leo, Oscar, and other contemporaries is not in question. But proving definitively that the church Louis built was the original site of White Oak Grove requires additional independent documentation.

A recently identified book housed at Duke University Library provides the needed support. Authored in 1971 by historian, Roger E. Sappington, PhD, the book is entitled, *The Brethren in the Carolinas: The History of the Church of the Brethren in the District of North and South Carolina*. Amazingly, Dr. Sappington documented the origin of White Oak Grove, or Oak Grove, as it was known in the beginning. He substantiated a number of details outlined in Leo's letter:

"One excellent example of the far-flung influence of the millions of pieces of tract literature which the [Church of the] Brethren were publishing in the years from 1880 to 1914 was the organization of the Oak Grove congregation in eastern North Carolina some seventy miles southeast of Raleigh in Lenoir County in the closing decade of the nineteenth century. The very limited evidence on this development indicates that a minister named Louis Foss had gathered together a group of people who organized a Church of God and held meetings in an old log house. As early as 1896 Foss had become dissatisfied with his religious beliefs, and after reading Brethren tracts (where did he get them, the historian wonders), his ideas changed and the group

seemed to consider themselves Brethren; in that year it was reported that there was a small Brethren church in La Grange, North Carolina."

"As the tracts suggested, Foss evidently wrote to the General Mission Board and Tract Committee of the German Baptist Church, which had been reorganized with that title in 1895. In response to his earnest inquiry, two Brethren, H. C. Early and J. M. Cline, came to North Carolina from Virginia to visit this group of interested seekers. After extensive discussions, Foss and his followers held a congregational council on September 17, 1900 and decided to reorganize as a Brethren congregation. H. C. Early was elected elder of the new congregation and Louis Foss was ordained as a minister; of course, the charter members were baptized as Brethren. The Mission Board indicated its continuing interest in this area by sending N. N. Garst as a home mission worker. In spite of the effectiveness of the Brethren tracts and in spite of the investment in time and money expended by Early, Garst, Foss, and others, it has proven to be a very difficult task to build a Brethren congregation when there is no nucleus of Brethren around which to build. The Oak Grove congregation did not have this nucleus and it did not survive in the twentieth century." (pp. 118-119)

This newly-revealed record confirms that an old log house and subsequent small church, presumably built by Louis around 1896, were the original sites of White Oak Grove. Further, it documents Louis was the founding pastor. One other significant, perhaps unexpected, revelation was that White Oak Grove's denominational roots from the start were not Free Will Baptist, but rather Church of God and Church of the Brethren.