

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

White Oak Grove Church (Part 5)

Deep in the bowels of the Duke University Library is a little-known book authored by historian, Roger E. Sappington, PhD in 1971. Important to the people of White Oak Grove, this book definitively documents the origin of the Church and provides conclusive proof that Rev. Louis Barkley Foss (1834-1908) of Bucklesberry was the founding pastor.

The focus of Dr. Sappington's book was development of the Church of the Brethren in the Carolinas. He provided convincing evidence that White Oak Grove was established as a Brethren church in 1896. Affiliation with the Brethren lasted only a few years, however. White Oak Grove has operated as a Free Will Baptist work since the early 1900s.

The source for Dr. Sappington's claim was *The Gospel Messenger*, weekly publication of the Church of the Brethren. He cited published letters and reports from 1896 to 1905 that were either written by or referenced Louis and his associate, Rev. Noah N. Garst (1879-1942). Home missionary to the newly chartered White Oak Grove, Rev. Garst was assigned by the national board of the Church of the Brethren, also known at the time as German Baptist Brethren.

In one of his first published letters dated November 20, 1896, Louis clearly affirmed, "We have a small Brethren church organized here." He outlined reasons why he decided to adopt the Brethren form of worship, leaving behind the Free Will Baptist doctrine he previously embraced. He also described his baptism by trine immersion in a nearby stream, probably Bear Creek. A distinctive of the Brethren doctrine, trine immersion required submersion in water not once, but three times to represent each of the three Persons of the Trinity.

The Gospel Messenger published several more reports the next year detailing Louis' transition to the Brethren doctrine and establishment of a church. In the January 9, 1897 issue, Louis was listed as a new member of the Brethren Church. Two more communications that year provided updates on the fledgling church:

1897, October 23: "Bro. Louis Foss, of La Grange, NC, writes that nine have applied for membership at that place. They have probably been baptized before this." (p. 680, *The Gospel Messenger*)

1897, December 11: "North Carolina. La Grange.—We organized our little church on Saturday night before the third Sunday in November [November 21, 1897]. There are eleven members in all. We held our love feast also. It is our intention to show forth the apostolic form of doctrine.

With God's help I trust that the pure light will still continue to shine, and I will, ere long, be able to send more glorious news.—Louis Foss, Nov. 29." (p. 797, *The Gospel Messenger*)

This report suggested a second organization of Louis' church in 1897. But it was more likely a re-organization, since the church had been established one year earlier in 1896. Nonetheless, celebration of the love feast probably signaled a more formal organization of Louis' church. The love feast is another distinctive of Brethren practice:

"After reconciling any discord among ourselves, we lovingly wash each other's feet, then enjoy a meal together. Quietly we share communion, the bread and the cup that remind us of Jesus' great gift; we renew our commitment to follow His example of sacrificial love....Love feast closes with a hymn; then follows the humble task of cleaning up, in which all are invited to participate. When we leave the feast, reunited in our dedication to Christ and to each other, the deep, nourishing love goes with us." (www.brethren.org, paras. 9-10)

The love feast held by Louis' small congregation is consistent with a recent letter written by his great-grandson, Dr. Leo Richard Anderson, MD. He references the church built by Louis that housed an 18-by-3-foot long table where the Lord's Supper and meals were served.