

Bucklesberry, Back in the Day

Primitive Worship

Resources needed for survival were not always conveniently available in rural communities of yesteryear. Water had to be hauled from nearby reservoirs or wells. Meats needed to be preserved in smokehouses separate from the homeplace houses. Wood necessary for cooking and heat typically had to be gathered from afar.

Folks couldn't readily exercise certain freedoms either, for example, attending worship services. Few options made it more challenging. Founded in 1756, the Bear Creek Primitive Baptist Church was the only church in the greater Bucklesberry and La Grange area for more than a century. Not until around 1860 would Bucklesberry see the establishment of Hickory Grove Church, the community's first truly local church.

Original papers dated 1858 to 1916 and housed at Duke University provide the names of Bear Creek Church members and contributors. Included were many residents from the heart of Bucklesberry, for example, Jesse Lassiter (1800-1866), Benjamin Sutton, Jr. (1795-1864), Hardy Sutton (1803-1861), and Dempsey Wood (1816-1881), to name a few.

Rev. Morgan Edwards, a leading Baptist preacher from Philadelphia, toured all the Baptist churches (called meeting houses) in the province of North Carolina in 1771-1772. He kept a journal of his observations, eventually published in 1930. His eyewitness account of Bear Creek Church in old Dobbs County, from which Lenoir County was later formed, follows:

"So named from a creek emptying into the Neuse, near to which the meeting house stands, in Dobbs County, 60 miles WNW from New Bern. The house is 20 feet by 15, built in [1756] on land given by Joshua Herring. No estate. Ruling elders and laying on of hands allowed. The families about 40 whereof 30 are baptized and in communion, celebrated 1st Sunday in Jan. Apr. Jul. October. This church originated by a transformation of general Baptists into particular..."

Joshua Herring was the second pastor of Bear Creek Church. Much of his farm has remained in the family line to the present day. Situated north of La Grange in the vicinity of Ed Herring Road, the Herring homeplace house still stands. Although in need of repair, this grand structure was built about 1801 by either Joshua Herring's son, Edward Matchet Herring, or Edward's son, William Herring.

Gary Fields, local surveyor, has reviewed a copy of the Joshua Herring land deed to the church. Using measurements provided therein, he determined that the original Bear Creek Church building was situated about a half-mile directly behind the Herring homeplace house and south of the Meeting House Branch (aptly named) that runs eastward from Bear Creek.

The distance from the meeting house at Bear Creek to some of the homeplaces of members who lived in Bucklesberry was about 10 miles. Although insignificant today, this travel distance required considerable time for folks back then. The typical horse-drawn wagon could travel about 15 to 25 miles a day. Therefore, the round-trip travel time likely required overnight stay.

Although grateful for the spiritual blessing, congregants nonetheless had to sit on wooden benches for worship services, which usually lasted all day. Revival meetings were referred to as protracted meetings. Long services, coupled with travel time, meant that congregants had to prepare for meals.

In his 1848 writings on Baptist history, David Benedict described how lodging and nourishment needs were met. Most meeting houses were built in areas surrounded by groves of trees, which provided cool shade during the hot, humid summers, thereby allowing churchgoers to camp fairly comfortably on the meeting house grounds. Although families living within close proximity to the meeting house were willing to share food with campers, ministers would advise congregants at the first camp meeting to "come to the next and all succeeding ones prepared to accommodate and refresh themselves" (p. 1173).

Compared with 21st century standards, meeting house worship was indeed primitive. But chances are, the worship environment that our ancestors knew was probably as natural to them in their day as sitting on padded pews for brief services in air-conditioned auditoriums are to us today.

[Caption to accompany photograph]

View from behind the Herring House facing the Meeting House Branch in the distance where the 1756 Bear Creek Primitive Baptist Church building stood.

