

Northern Kentucky Views Presents:

The History of the Willow Baptist
Church of Bracken County, 1818-1981

by

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THE HISTORY OF THE WILLOW BAPTIST CHURCH
OF BRACKEN COUNTY
1818-1981

Religion has influenced the life of every human being, since the creation of man, either by his taking an active part or living under its influence. The pioneers entering Kentucky settled in this new territory to live and exercise these religious privileges. A visitor driving through part of the Appalachian region of Kentucky will find numerous little churches dotting the countryside. Many of these rural churches are Baptist and bear such names as Sinking Creek, Long Fork, and Indian Bottom. Such names are representative of the particular creek, branch, or bottom in which they happen to be located.¹

The story of the Baptists began in Holland in 1609 when some radical Puritans, having left England to escape the persecution, established a church which taught that "baptism should be upon profession of faith in Christ."² Many of these Baptists returned to England. Their faith grew with several churches sending missionaries to Virginia around 1715. Baptists settled in Kentucky around the late 1700's or early 1800's. With a slightly different set of teachings, the General Baptists, the Separatists, the Free Will Baptists, and the Primitive

¹Lynn Dickerson, "The Baptists of the Cumberland Mountains," Appalachian Heritage, Spring 1975, p. 60.

²Ibid.

Baptist groups came into being.³

It is true that history is indeed a combination of many things. It seems to overshadow the present, as the present overshadows the future. History is cold facts reflecting the pathos, the nobility, the humor, the scandals, the fame, the failures and the great faith of many. The Willow Baptist Church of Bracken County, Kentucky, is such a church which though small in size is great in heritage.

The Willow Baptist Church was an outgrowth of the North Fork Baptist Church which was located near Milford, Kentucky. Since the members who resided on Willow Creek suffered inconvenience in attending services, they asked permission to establish a church which would be more convenient.⁴

On June 12, 1818, a number of churches sent delegates to act as a committee to look into the standing and strength for the purpose of establishing a church. It was at the home of William King that the first meeting was held. Brother Charles Webb delivered a sermon and was chosen the first moderator. A separate church was organized, and the first two members were received by experience. They were Mary Nailer and Catherine Owens.⁵

The first pastor was Robert Elrod who was called on October 14, 1820. His salary was \$50 a year. On March 9, 1825,

³Ibid, p. 62.

⁴Papers on History of Churches in Union Association; Collected by Ray Toadvine, Sr., 1970, p. 17.

⁵Minutes(original) of Willow Baptist Church, June 12, 1818.

the church fund was begun by subscription, this being the first record of people being in agreement as to keeping a church fund. From the minutes, some of the convictions and theology of that early group can be noted. They wrote, "We, the people of Willow Creek believe the Bible to be the infallible word of God and the only rule of faith and practice. That there is only one true God--that by nature, we are fallen and depraved creatures--that salvation, regeneration, sanctification and justification are by the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ."⁶

Very strict rules were set up and practiced. One rule indicated that any male member failing to fill his seat on church meeting days, three meetings in succession, would be invited to come before the church and give the reason for his absence. Another interesting story is told by Frazier Dailey, Jr. in the History of Churches in the Union Association collection of papers. Brother Charles Webb, the first moderator and a preacher himself, had some difficulty one day with his wife who tried to uphold at all times the status of mistress over her slaves. Upon one occasion when the slave had displeased her greatly, she ordered, "Charles, take that black man to the meat house and give him a genuine, old fashioned whipping." Brother Webb, being the soft-hearted preacher that he was, proceeded to the meat house with a whip and the slave. When safely out of sight of his mistress, Brother Webb turned to

⁶Ibid.

his slave and said, "Henry, take this whip and beat that sack of salt for all you are worth and yell to the top of your lungs." The slave complied and soon afterward the Mistress Webb came to meet the preacher, complimenting him for what he had done.⁷

Another anecdote found in the minutes involved an accusation made against Brother Turner for "whippin" Brother Larkin, his slave. Brother Turner gave satisfaction by saying he "would whip him no more without trying him before the church."⁸

On October 13, 1827, the members voted to use the church for a school house and to raise funds for a stove and to finish the meeting house. The building was located at the forks of Bullskin Road, the only road which forked at Willow. Records show that a frame building was started in 1853 and completed in 1856. This little white church building was torn down in 1981.⁹

The church members were still disciplined by strict rules of conduct and behaviour. They sought to promote peace and love, and harmony by frowning on whispering and backbiting. Those members who used profane language or acted immorally, sold or used intoxicating liquor, were compelled to come to the next church conference and make acknowledgement. The church proceeded to admonish or to put away according to the offense. The church minutes recorded accurately beside the name of the admonished member the words "expelled" or

⁷Papers on History of Churches in Union Association, 1970, p. 15. (Story told by Frazier Dailey, Jr.)

⁸Minutes of Willow Baptist Church, April 17, 1826.

⁹Minutes, May 17, 1856.

"dismissed" and the exact date of the action.¹⁰

~~No outstanding history was made between the years of 1889 to 1904, but the church seemed concerned to do greater things~~ in Christian service. A faithful and devoted pastor during this period and for twenty-two years was Brother Sam Burgess. Upon his departure he presented the church with a beautiful silver communion set which cost \$17.50. At about this same time, the church purchased its first organ for \$71.05. The salary of the pastors at that time was about \$200 a year.

The problems of this decade from 1904 to 1914 were characterized by two main obstacles: securing and keeping a pastor and keeping the treasury replenished.¹¹

In 1915 the church voted to have services twice a month on Sundays. The first prayer meeting was organized in 1917 to be on a Friday night. Another important event for the church was the organization of the Sunday School program on May 3, 1918.¹²

The span of time between the years of 1918 and 1969 included rapid changes toward modernization of church property and principles. In 1924 a motion was made to buy gasoline lamps for the church. In 1925, a women's missionary union was organized. In 1929, individual communion cups were bought, and electric lights were installed. A basement fund was initiated in 1944, and in 1946 the church was remodeled and the basement built. In 1948 the coal stoves were removed and an oil furnace was

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Minutes, 1889 to 1904.

¹²Minutes, May 10, 1918.

installed. The first Daily Vacation Bible School was begun in 1949. The church voted to maintain full-time preaching on May 3, 1959, with Brother Jasper Keith given a unanimous call as pastor. On August 6, 1967, a beautiful new brick church was dedicated with an estimated value of around \$225,000.¹³

The period of time from 1967 to 1981 has been plagued with financial problems typical for a rural church and with the securing of a pastor. Five pastors have led the membership for an average of three years each. In spite of these difficulties, it is important to appreciate the great Christian heritage that has guided these people of the Willow Baptist Church. As can be seen, the church's people have overcome great hardships to keep this church alive and thriving. The present membership of approximately 150 people include many who are descendants of those first Kentucky pioneers who gathered together so bravely on June 12, 1818, to establish a church. The contribution that this church has made to the well being of this community and state are immeasurable. Churches such as Willow Baptist Church have made this country great.¹⁴

¹³Minutes, 1924-1967.

¹⁴Minutes, April 5, 1981.

(A = 79)
 Excellent paper
 The topic is important
 make it more
 interesting but show more
 first time people
 in 70's
 JS