

History of the Birdell/Noland Churches of Christ

Randolph County, Arkansas is one of the oldest and most well known counties in the state of Arkansas. The area that is now known as Randolph County has been at one time or another owned by three different countries. This land was originally owned by the French, but was sold to the Spanish in 1770 who divided it into two districts: Upper Louisiana and Lower Louisiana. After thirty years, Napoleon Bonaparte forced the Spanish to sell all of the land west of the Mississippi River back to the French. In the year 1803, Napoleon sold this land to the United States in what is known as the Louisiana Purchase. Two years after the purchase, the area was renamed the Territory of Louisiana. This name was used until December 7, 1812 when the area became known as the Territory of Missouri.

After the New Madrid earthquake the Territory of Missouri added a new county named Lawrence County. From 1819 until 1835 the area that is now known as Randolph County was part of Lawrence County in the Territory of Arkansas. One year later in 1836 the Territory of Arkansas became the State of Arkansas.

During this time there was a movement taking place in Randolph County that was known as the Restoration Movement. This movement was started by several men including Barton Stone, Thomas Campbell, and Alexander Campbell in Kentucky and West Virginia. These men taught that the church needed to get back to worshiping the same way as Christians worshiped in New Testament times. Before the movement really took off there were a few families that had been influenced by these men who began to migrate west.

Three Rivers

In about the year 1806 there was a group of settlers who came to Arkansas from Kentucky and settled a few miles west of the present site of Old Davidsonville State Park. These people settled at a place which came to be known as Three Rivers. The area obtained this name due to the fact that three rivers run together in a close proximity to each other. These rivers are the Eleven Point River, Spring River, and the Black River. The Black River at this time had a major impact on the lives of people who lived in this area. This was the way that they received the supplies they needed for there were no stores or even any towns near this area at that time. Before these families left Kentucky they had been influenced by the teaching of men like Barton Stone and had joined his "Christians only" movement. Therefore, when they moved to Arkansas they took their new religious beliefs with them. When they arrived in the Three Rivers area they met in each others homes for a while and then they built a meeting house, these families constituted the first Church of Christ west of the Mississippi River. The foundation of this old building can still be seen today. This meeting house served the Three Rivers congregation until the settlement of Fort Davidsonville was established at the site of an ancient Indian village.

Davidsonville

Fort Davidsonville for its time was a very large community. At one time the population of Fort Davidsonville was nearly five hundred. If you visit this site today, you cannot begin to imagine how that many people lived in that small of an area. The interesting thing about this settlement was it held the first courthouse, land office, post office and many other firsts for the state of Arkansas. Davidsonville as it came to be called became the first county seat of Lawrence County. When first settled, court was held in the home of a man named Solomon Hewett, but was soon replaced by an actual courthouse. In 1829 an epidemic of yellow fever swept through the village and wiped out over half of the population. After this tragedy, most of the survivors moved into a new settlement called Jackson near the present town of Imboden.

The Christians which had been meeting at Three Rivers moved into the community of Davidsonville not long after its establishment. They built a new meeting house there and were joined by several new families. The church now consisted of members of each of the following families: Ellis, Leathers, Scot, Von Bauers, Reeves, Phillips, Ferguson, Slayton, Gwin, Barnes, Pyland, Pace, Hufstedler, and Lemmons. Most of these families are still prominent in the Churches of Christ in Randolph County today. After the epidemic of Yellow Fever swept through the community of Davidsonville, these Christians were left with nowhere to go.

Gwin Creek

These families moved three miles north and settled on a small creek named Gwin Creek. One of the first things they did was build a meeting house. They built a log church building and conducted services in this location for the next twenty-three years. In the year 1852 the church split and half of the congregation moved to Cherry Hill which is the modern day Noland congregation and the other half moved three miles farther north and settled on another small creek called Carter Creek.

Cherry Hill/Noland

Until the year 1890 this community and the congregation of the Lord's church there were known as Cherry Hill. In 1890 a post office was established at this location and the name was changed to Noland. There are several accounts of how this community received this name. The three most popular are: 1) The community was named after the first postmaster's wife Nova Pyland. 2) The community was named after an early resident of Randolph County named Charles Noland. 3) The community received its name because when the post office was first established many people came there looking for land and there was none to be had, therefore, the community was named this so people would know that there was no land available. I do not know how it received its name but the name has stuck and it is still known by that name today. The Cherry Hill/Noland congregation met in a log building for twenty-five years until in 1880 it began meeting in an old school house. A white frame 30' X 40' church building was constructed in 1910 and served the congregation until the present building was built in 1956. Preachers at Noland through the years have included P.E. Pinkston, Glendon Walker, Jerry Collins, and the current preacher is Joshua Dement. Noland remains an active and thriving congregation to this day with an average Sunday morning attendance of 35.

Carter Creek

The other half of the old Gwin Creek congregation who moved to Carter Creek consisted of seven families. These families were: the Leathers, Pyland, Pace, Slayton, Barnes, Hufstedler, and Lemmons families. These families built a new log meeting house but it burned not long after it was built. Another building was built soon after but was just a temporary building and was very small. In 1855 a decision was made and they decided to move the church one mile farther north to Hubble Creek.

Hubble Creek

The Hubble Creek congregation was formed in 1855 by the members of the former Carter Creek congregation and several members from the Blue Springs congregation in Independence County. The first documented mention of this congregation was in 1857 when members of the church attended a District Cooperation Meeting at the Mill Creek Church of Christ in Izard

County. At the time, Hubble Creek was listed as having fifteen members. This congregation was a very strong and very spiritual group of believers. They enjoyed some of the greatest preachers that the brotherhood has ever known. Around the time that the church was established a new family moved into the area. The family of which I am mentioning is the John M. Lemmons family. This was a family that would become known throughout the world for their abilities. Three of the earliest preachers at Hubble Creek were: John M. Lemmons, William Nicks (Nix), and W. B. Hodge. These were three men who served the church as located ministers in the early days. In 1868 the elders of the Hubble Creek church were: John M. Lemmons, Cullin Pyland, L. D. Cartwright, Samuel J. Donnell, and S. M. Hufstedler (my Great-great-grandfather). The church issued minister credentials to two of John M. Lemmons' sons. Amos Josephus Lemmons and Peyton Lemmons. These two men became very popular preachers in Randolph County and across the nation. This congregation was a strong and thriving church until 1944 when it was forced, due to low attendance, to consolidate with the newly formed Birdell congregation.

Negrotown/Old Birdell/New Friendship

Probably the most significant thing the Hubble Creek Church did during its many years of existence was to establish a congregation of the Lord's Church for the growing African American community in 1873. This congregation was located on what is present day Fairview Road across the Eleven Point River from Hubble Creek. The Hubble Creek church had an African American family meeting with them named Shockley. George "Kit" Shockley was ordained by the elders at Hubble Creek. Shockley along with his three sons who also became preachers established the Negrotown Church of Christ in 1873. A one room white frame building was built and was named Friendship School. This would become the meeting house for the Negrotown congregation. This building housed the congregation until the 1950's when a new cinder block meeting house was built. This housed the church until the late 1960's when the Negrotown Church of Christ consolidated with the Birdell Church of Christ. The original meeting house remained standing until 1994 when vandals set fire to the building destroying a piece of history. The new cinder block building was converted into a residence and it is the current home of Ms. Luttie Mae Johnson a former member of the Negrotown church.

Oak Hill

In 1863 Amos Josephus Lemmons held a mission meeting probably through the Hubble Creek Church and formed the Oak Hill Church of Christ. This church built a one room white frame building which served this congregation until 1917. This building is long since gone, but the site where it stood is on the property of Mr. Jim Menard about a quarter of a mile off of Hwy. 62 on Squirrel Road. There are no known pictures of this building, and none of the members are living today. My Great-Great Grandmother Fanny (Hufstedler) Wells was a member there while she was growing up, but she did not pass any information down to the next generation. In 1917 the group decided to build a new building closer to the community of Birdell and they named this new congregation Little Springs.

Little Springs

This church was located on present day Fairview Road across from the residence of Howard Dunn, and about two miles from the Negrotown church. The church built a white frame 30' X 40' building that served the congregation until 1940. When my great-grandmother Ruth

(Wells) Menard was growing up they would walk about two miles from their old home to attend church here. This church was unique in that it utilized the use of one cup during communion. The main preacher during the church's existence was Amos M. Lemmons who was the son of John M. Lemmons. During this church's existence they were strong supporters of the Negrotown Church. The Negrotown church would host Sunday afternoon singings and many of the Little Springs members would attend and lend their support. This is one thing both of these congregations are remembered for, their great gospel singing.

In about the year 1940, conflicts came to a blow and the church split. All of the reasons for the split are unknown, but the two major ones were the use of multiple cups in communion and one man trying to run the entire congregation. This man, whom I will not name, felt he ruled the congregation, and could tell everyone else what to do. One thing he did that the people disagreed with was he had thought the same people had to do the same things week after week. One time a man came got up to lead singing, and he was not who this man wanted to lead so he told the man, "If you don't sit down, I'll knock you down." He was known for doing things of this nature, and finally the people had enough and all but three families began meeting with the Old Union church. These three families immediately tore down the Little Springs church house and built a home for one of the families. These three families continued meeting at this home until one of the families began meeting with the Birdell church and the other two families established the Hillside congregation between Pocahontas and Maynard. All in all this was a very strong and faithful congregation of the Lord's Church.

Old Union

About the time Oak Hill began meeting in 1866, a new log school house was built and named Old Union. Several families who lived near this building began holding worship services there. This building served the school and congregation until it was destroyed by fire in 1912. In 1913 a new one room white frame school house was built by a man named William Campbell, this building is still standing today. This man was the Grandfather of Lucille Hufstedler who is a life long member of the Old Union/Birdell Congregation. Many people affiliated in the Churches of Christ in Randolph County today attended school at Old Union. Two of the people who attended Old Union are the Wallis brothers Ralph and Frank. Ralph Wallis became one of the most popular gospel meeting preachers in Randolph County and his brother Frank became a well-known song leader for the Pyburn Street congregation. The church continued meeting in the Old Union school house until 1942 when they constructed the building at Birdell and established a new congregation.

Birdell

In 1942 the Old Union church had outgrown its building and began to seek out a place to construct a new building. They found a place just across the Eleven Point River on the road that would become Highway 62. The church members began construction soon after and three men from the congregation did most of the work. These men were Hutch Fielden, Jeff Fielden, Uncle Jeff Hufstedler, and Glen Hufstedler. They hauled the stone and sand by horse and wagon to the location and constructed the sandstone building that is still used by the church today. This building was finished in March of 1943 and a dedication ceremony was held on April 27, of the same year. On that Sunday they had between fifty and sixty people present and Oscar L. Hayes preached the first sermon in the new building.

The newly established congregation appointed four men as elders they were: Hutch

Fielden, Glen Hufstedler, Jake Hufstedler, and P. E. Pinkston. After these men passed away the church went for many years without elders. In the early to mid fifties an addition was added to the church house. Two new classrooms were built up stairs, the fellowship area in the basement was enlarged, and two classrooms and restrooms were added to the basement. This church has remained a strong and faithful congregation for the sixty-two years it has been in existence. For many years the attendance was near seventy, but it gradually began to decrease. In the mid nineteen-nineties the attendance dropped into the low thirties. In the past few years the attendance has climbed back up and the average Sunday morning attendance is between forty-five and fifty. In the year 2000, the church appointed three elders and three deacons. The elders were: Jay Hyde(deceased), Danny Wells(deceased), and Gary Wells. The deacons were: Randy O'Neal(resigned a year later), Randy Utmage, and Jimmy Wells. The congregation does not currently have elders and deacons serving.

Through the years the Birdell church has enjoyed some of the greatest preachers to ever stand in the pulpit. Some of the men who served as full-time ministers were: Oscar L. Hays, Ralph Wallis, Jack Gray, Lowell Blasingame, Cecil Wilson, Maurice Hurd, Carter Crewse, Dr. Grant Killian, Pete Waites, Ira Woodward, Mike Bowers, Stanley Rogers, John Flowers, Don House, Danny Wells, William "Rowdy" Fortson, Wilburn Baucom, Bill Willard, and currently Timothy Wells. Their favorite preachers for gospel meetings have been: Ralph Wallis, Jack Gray, and in more recent years Tim Wooldridge.

One thing the Birdell church has always been known for is its outstanding gospel singing. The song leaders through the years have been: Hutch Fielden, Frank Wallis, Eugene Hufstedler, Jim Grissom, Jay Hyde, and Gary Wells who currently serves in this capacity.

The church has always been a strong supporter of their youth. While they never have had a large youth group, they always find ways to keep them interested and encouraged. For several years they enjoyed a program where every first Sunday of the month the teenage boys would conduct the worship service.

In 2003 the church underwent a renovation of the basement. Jim Collins a member of the Birdell church put paneling up over the old stone walls, put in new lighting, and put in a kitchen area. This has provided the congregation with more room to have meals and more storage space.

The church is very active in supporting mission work. They currently support mission work in: India, Kenya, Tuba City, Arizona(Indians), and several local mission efforts. They also support the Paragould and Morrilton childrens' homes.

This writer was blessed to grow up in the congregation at Birdell and feels equally blessed to have been able to serve as the minister for the Noland congregation for five years. These two congregations have a long history of serving the spiritual needs of southern Randolph County. Untold numbers of lost souls have been added to the church through their efforts. Both continue today as thriving congregations of the Lord's church and continue to write the next chapters of their history.