

Church Boasts 93 Years

By Helen Barrett Woodroofe

- Almost one hundred years ago, the first group of Baptists met in Centerville, which later became Athena. With the assistance of the pioneer circuit-rider, Rev. William H. Pruett, a Baptist church was organized on April 26, 1884. The charter members involved Mr. and Mrs. R. B. Wooddy, Mr. and Mrs. Marion Walker, Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Chandler, Anna Ballinger, and B. C. Marcum. Because most of the members lived in the Adams area, they decided in 1886 to relocate there, changing their name to the Adams Baptist Church.

The present Athena Baptist Church was organized on Nov.13, 1890, under the leadership of the Adams pastor, Rev. DeWitt Ellis, and with the encouragement of the Adams brethren. They adopted the "Articles of Faith and Covenant," given in the Baptist Church Directory and elected Rev. Ellis as their pastor and sister Jennie Barrett, clerk. Other charter members were Mr. and Mrs. M. D. Mitchell, William Pinkerton, E. C. McClain, Carrie Turner, and William Clark. They voted to hold services every fourth Saturday evening and Sunday afternoon in the Christian Church. One dollar per service was to be paid for the use of the building. In the spring of 1891 the services were changed to the Methodist Church, for a fee of 50c a meeting, an offer gratefully accepted, as the average collection was only about 60c.

On June 22, 1891, Thomas Kirk (who with D.A. Richards had both donated part of their farms for the town site of Athena) gave the Baptists a lot in Block 2 of his fourth addition for a building site. That lot was exchanged with attorney E. DePeatt for the south half of lots 11 and 12 in the same block, thus obtaining a corner location by paying Mr. DePeatt \$50.00 difference.

The pastor began circulating a petition to build a church on the new lot, and construction got under way. The foundation was completed at a cost of \$67.50, and the Gulls brothers took a contract for the carpenter work for the figure of \$11.00. Lumber was secured from M.D. Mitchell and his partner in the lumber business, George Hansell.

Demonstrating how close the different congregations were in spirit, the records show that on July 4, 1891, the Baptist and Christian Church members met for dinner in the old "Natural Grove" in the present City Park; and at this dinner the sum of \$55.00 was received for the Baptist building fund.

At a business meeting Sept.19, 1891, Rev. Wm. H. Pruett was called as pastor. He had retired from circuit riding because of ill health, and was only too willing to help the struggling congregation through the throes of its building project

On November 21, 1891, Jennie Barrett, William Pinkerton, and E. McClain, as trustees, filed Articles of Incorporation with the State of Oregon. Article II stated: "The object of this

corporation shall be the owning and holding of church property, the maintenance of a church organization for the worship of GOD, and the teaching of the religion of Christ."

The building was completed by mid-winter and dedicated on January 17, 1892 by the new pastor, Rev. E. Stillwell. It was a white frame structure, sitting close to the ground, with only one large room and some closets, heated by a pot-bellied stove. But what an accomplishment the building represented can be gathered from the following excerpt from the Baptist Annals of Oregon by C. H. Mattoon: "The cost of the building was about \$2,000, all furnished by 13 poor members and their friends, and was free of debt except for \$300 owed to the Home Mission

Society." The Annals also reported that Rev. Stillwell was "a live man, a good preacher, a successful organizer, and held in high esteem by all the churches, with a noble band of brethren and sisters to sustain him."

The next order of business was to solicit funds for a cross-walk to the church, for there must have been a sea of mud surrounding it.

A contemporary report states that in 1893 the Athena Christian Church had 275 members, the Methodist Church 60, and the Baptists 12. Undaunted by their small size, the Baptists called Rev. E. A. Leonard as pastor in 1893, and under his guidance they prospered. The first paid janitor was hired, and first small organ was donated, the windows were covered with red and green paper, and trustee William Pinkerton was authorized to haul lumber to build sidewalks.

Rev. Leonard was followed in 1896 by Rev. C. H. McKee. It was he who baptized my father in Wildhorse Creek, as the new church did not yet have a baptistry. Baptism by immersion was then and remains today an essential part of Baptist faith and practice.

In 1899 the pastor was Rev. M. Bramblett, of whom it was reported that "he did good work, although hindered by the prevalence of diphtheria." The new century started out under the ministry of Rev. R. Hargreaves, who came for a salary of \$277 a year to serve both the Athena and Weston Baptist Churches.

Ministers were not always mild and peaceable in those early days, as shown by this newspaper article from a Walla Walla paper of May 20, 1904, found among the old records, Under the headline, DEACON POKED IN EYE, was the following story.

"A slug over the left eye was what Deacon William Pinkerton got Wednesday at Athena, Or., when he argued with Rev. W. H. H. Moore, pastor of the Athena Baptist Church, that the latter had no more salary coming to him. Mr. Moore was about to leave for Iowa with his wife and three children, and had been paid off. He claimed more money was due him, and meeting the deacon on the street a heated argument ensued, culminating in the blow from which Pinkerton now wears a discolored optic. The deacon is 70 years old. Mr. Moore is 40 and reputed to have a hasty temper."

After Rev. Moore's tumultuous leave-taking, the next pastor, Rev. G. T. Ellis, presided over a four and a half year period of harmony and growth. Rev. Ellis's former church at Bakersfield,

Calif. sent gifts of a pulpit and communion set for his new church. And the congregation acquired their first parsonage, at Sixth and College Streets, for Rev. and Mrs. Ellis to occupy.

Many new members were added to the rolls, among them young Charles and Fannie Betts, who were received by letter from the Helix Baptist Church on May 1, 1905. They had come to Helix from New York State as newlyweds, for Mr. Betts to accept a position in Mosgrove's Store. Soon after coming to Athena, Mrs. Betts took over from J. F. Gross as church clerk, and Mr. Betts became a trustee. Over the years their service to the church was immeasurable, both serving in every possible position - deacon, deaconess, Sunday School teacher, Sunday School Superintendent, trustee, treasurer, clerk. Now second-, third-, and fourth- generation descendants carry on their work.

Mrs. Betts was one of the charter members of the Women's Missionary Society when it was organized on March 15, 1906. Other members were Mrs. M. L. Watts, Mrs. Charles Kirk, Mrs. Fred Gross, Mrs. Hugh McArthur, Mrs. D. Plamondon, and Jennie Barrett. The next year they were joined by a young lady named Myrtle Gordon, who is today honored as the oldest living member of the Athena Baptist Church and Missionary Society.

Several lean years followed, but the "saving remnant" kept the deliberation about how they were going to raise the money, they called Rev. Milo Bentley in 1915 at a salary of \$800 per year. It was a happy choice, for his ministry was a period of growth and activity. Around 100 new members joined the church, among them Mr. and Mrs. Cass Cannon, whose descendants are mainstays of the church today. During Rev. Bentley's pastorate, the basement was put in, a Sunday School room was added on the south, and an organ loft was constructed. He also organized a large choir and started the Baptist Young People's Union. Edna Lieuallen (Mrs. Paul) remembers going to the first statewide B.Y.P.U. convention at Salem, where the young people camped out on the State Fair Grounds.

In 1918, additional land on the north side of the church was purchased from William Winship and Sam Hutt. Unsanitary barn buildings were eliminated, greatly improving the appearance of the property. Rev. D. E. Baker was the minister at the time. Finances were still very tight. At one 1918 meeting the sum of \$1.55 was allowed for lumber, stumps, and stove blacking. Repairs were also made to the baptistry that year.

In 1920, even though the church was without a minister, \$60.00 was collected and sent to the starving Armenians. Rev. E. B. Johnson was called in 1921, the year the street in front of the church was paved, costing the members \$502.00. In 1923 the pot-bellied stove was replaced by a furnace. So the life of the church went on, financed more often than not by real

sacrifices on the part of the congregation. During the 1920's, the Women's Missionary Society supported a Christian hospital in Shaohing, China, and finished an "Athena Room" in the hospital.

Rev. Delbert Loree was the pastor from 1923 to 1925. Officers elected in 1925 were Charles Betts, Clerk; Cass Cannon, Treasurer; Mrs. Joe Anderson, Beneficence Treasurer; Henry Barrett, Trustee; O.C. Hadley, S. S. Superintendent; George Bannister and Cass Cannon, Deacons. In

1926, the first parsonage was sold, and the large square house on the corner of Third and Jefferson Streets was purchased from Mr. and Mrs. M. L. Watts. It was first occupied as a parsonage by Rev. and Mrs. E. M. Bollinger, who served from 1926 to 1928. In 1928, more repairs were made to the church building, and a sink was plumbed into the basement kitchen, making it possible to serve refreshments and dinners.

The 1920's came to a close under the pastorage of Rev. H. E. Dow, who died in office in August 1930. During the Twenties the B.Y.P.U. had flourished with Mr. and Mrs. Jess Smith as advisors. Their older daughters, Lois and Lucille, were in high school, and others in the group were Belle Anderson, Kohler and Reeve Betts, Juanita Woodruff, Frank Williams, Ruth Williams, Granville and Frances Cannon, Dorothy and Margaret Lee.

In the early Thirties, the B. Y. P. U. was almost all girls - the Cannon, Ross, and Barrett girls, Doris Street, Gene Zerba, Mary Jane Miller, Arleen Foster, Arleen Myrick, Annabelle Payne, Barbara Lee, and Rachel Smith. However, a few boys such as Marville Zerba, Robert lee, and Roy Moore kept it from being exclusively female.

Rev. C. H. Northrup was the pastor from 1931 to 1934. About that time Mrs. Zeltha McIntyre traded her small house on Van Buren Street to the church for a parsonage in exchange for the Walls house, which had proved too large for most ministers' families. Mrs. McIntyre was the church treasurer at the time. When she resigned in 1933, Kohler Betts was elected to the position. Little did he realize that he would hold it for close to 50 years!

In 1937, during the pastorage of Rev. George Eads, an addition was built into the rear of the building, with funds bequeathed to the church by Mr. and Mrs. Henry Koepke, Sr. The added room provided a pastor's study, a choir room, and Sunday School room. In September 1937, the parsonage was redecorated before the arrival of Rev. Elmer Beutler and his family.

Rev. Beutler was instrumental in uniting the Weston and Athena Baptist Churches in 1938. As a result of the merger, a trust fund of around \$1,200 was transferred to the Athena church. The corporate name of the church was changed to "The First Baptist Church of Athena and Weston, Oregon." The church property in Weston was deeded to the Oregon Baptist Convention, which held a mortgage on the building. It was a sad ending for the first Baptist Church in Eastern Oregon, founded near Weston on March 19, 1866. But the Athena Baptists welcomed the infusion of new members - Winns, Wiers, McCulloughs, and Crowls, to name a few - who came to them from Weston.

And so the Athena Baptist Church, affiliated with the American Baptist Convention, enters its 93rd year, still faithful to the goals of its pioneer founders "The maintenance of a church organization for the worship of God and the teaching of the religion of Christ."