

Too-tiny church alive with spirit of Woolsey's heritage



EMILY OAKLEY / Staff

In with the new:
A 35-foot aluminum steeple is lowered onto the roof of the new Woolsey Baptist Church, where members will begin worshipping in about a month.

Congregation sad to leave for larger quarters

By Bill Robinson
STAFF WRITER

The cup at Woolsey Baptist Church is indeed running over. In fact, the people in administration, and even some members of the congregation, are scattered around like portions of an army on bivouac.

"I feel real sad when I think about leaving the old church," said church member Mamie Lee Bowlden. "But I also feel like we're about to burst at the seams there, too. We've just got to have more room."

In about a month, the Rev. Charles H. "Chuck" Chambers and his flock take up residence in a brand-new brick church six-tenths of a mile down the road from the old one, at the intersection of Hampton and Antioch roads. The cost: \$1.5 million. It seats 420 and is on 15 acres.

The need for a new church is self-evident. Many of the preschool children's classrooms were in construction trailers, two of which had to be parked next door on the property of John McLean, at 84 the church's oldest member. A half-dozen other classes were held in the Davison's Masonic Lodge.

Chambers and his church staff (two secretaries) use the Jimco Construction Co. building for the main church office.

"We are scattered here and there," said Chambers. "To make sure we have space in the future, the church purchased the 15 acres. Our architect has designed the new church so we can expand, and someday down the road we'll need an educational building and a worship center."

The old white, wood-frame church was born as Harmony Grove Missionary Baptist Church more than 100 years ago. Today it sits on not quite an acre of ground. The old church can hold only 190 people. In its graveyard are the dead of four generations.

But the old church is not being abandoned. It will be used for weddings and funerals.

And there are precious memories. Bowlden, 68, is on the cradle roll of the original church. Her child, Bonnie Sue, died in an accident in 1959.

"Bonnie Sue's buried at old Woolsey," said Bowlden. "I live not a quarter of a mile from where I was born. I went away — not far away, to Griffin — for eight years. My other two children live right next door to me.



DWIGHT ROSS JR. / Staff

Moving on: Members Margaret Stubbs (left), Mary L. Pridgen and John McLean stand in front of old Woolsey Baptist.

My son lives on my left, my surviving daughter on my right. And I have three fine grandsons."

And the memories are precious to John McLean. As the church's honored elder, he could almost sit in the old church on a Sunday and expect most of the congregation to bring the service back up there to him.

But McLean helped lead the long, hard journey toward a new church. It took 15 years.

"It's going to be sad, that's for sure," he said of leaving old Woolsey. "I share the same driveway with the old church — that's how close I am to it. That church is on hallowed ground. But we had to move — for now and especially for the future."

McLean remembers when, as he said, he was "knee-high to nothing," having to go to Woolsey Baptist Church every Sunday.

"You didn't have any option," he said. "It was expected of you. You didn't ask why. You got up, got dressed and you went to church. And you didn't say anything, either, on the way or when you got there. It was a different time, a different world."

He doesn't condemn the present. He simply realizes that he was "fortunate enough" to have known kerosene lamps, and well-water, and plowed ground and cotton and corn growing, and slow, hot days when neighbors came to visit and sit a spell in a rocking chair or swing on a front porch and just talk.

There was no television to dominate a room and all its conversation, and there was dinner on the grounds at the old Woolsey church . . . and so much more that was so different.

McLean remembers the sandy churchyard filling up fast on Sunday mornings, mostly with buggies. There were some heavy-wheeled two-horse wagons (which were inevitably hitched to a pair of mules).

Then one Sunday when he was about 10, the churchyard had changed. The horses and mules had departed. Model-T Fords were parked in their place. Big black iron fenders cooked in the summer sun, and there was the special smell of the metal as it became too hot to touch.

"Woolsey was a cotton town, a

real thriving community then," McLean said. "We had a big cotton gin, and folks were raising a lot of cotton, and trains stopped right here and loaded up bale after bale."

One Sunday in August 1924, when McLean was 12, he dressed in old clothes and climbed into a Model-T for his most unforgettable day at Woolsey Baptist. From church he and his family traveled about a mile up a dirt road to Burch's Pond. Dr. W.W. Arnold baptized McLean in the pond, laying him back and under the surface until the pond water filled McLean's nostrils.

"It wasn't real bad, the water," he said. "I really felt good all over. The cotton crop was in, and we were having revival. It was a good time for me to get baptized."

McLean said he grew up "hearing the good stories" concerning Dr. I.G. Woolsey, a medical doctor, farmer and preacher. Woolsey, for whom the town (population now about 160) and the church were named, helped found Harmony Grove Missionary Baptist Church on Aug. 26, 1888. There were 23 members. Woolsey and T.S. Allen of Griffin, W.H. Prichard of Brooks (then Brooks Station) and Harry Wells of Zebulon were its elders.

Wells preached the first sermon, from First Corinthians 3:11. The church then was in a small store near the old Southern Railroad tracks, where Ga. 92 is now, in Woolsey. By March 1889, a 36-by-50-foot building was ready.

The original steeple was removed years later and the bell was let down into the loft, where it has remained ever since.

Woolsey died in 1902, and two years later, on Oct. 2, Harmony Grove was renamed in honor of the good doctor.

In the tradition of the times, the old church had two front doors (many churches had separate entrances for men and women) and three rows of pews inside the sanctuary. To the right and left of the pulpit were high-backed chairs that were referred to as the "Amen Corner."

A front porch spanned the church, but it was removed in 1950 and a single entrance built. Over the years additions came; Sunday school rooms in 1963 and 1970, when a steeple again went up, and a redone choir loft in 1982. Finally, urban growth overwhelmed old Woolsey.

"We all know that Fayette County is growing and just keeps on growing," said Chambers. "If a church is to reach out to people, it has to prepare to grow, too. The Gospel doesn't change, it stays the same. But the method changes, and that's the reason for the new church."