Oak Grove church to celebrate homecoming and heritage trees

By Jackie Kennedy
Co-chair, Troup TREEmendous

A century and one decade ago, members of southeast Troup County's Church of Christ flock were searching for just the right spot to build their church. Electricity in this rural area was 40 years into the future and positioning the church under ample shade was necessary to provide cooling in the hot southern summers.

In 1899, the perfect spot was chosen and Oak Grove Congregational Christian Church was built amidst the oak trees for which it was named. Today, 110 years later, many of the original oaks still stand.

Mildred Hagler, 85, joined the church when she was 11 years old. Her earliest memories include playing under the trees.

"When we were children, there was an old baptismal pit outside that hadn't been used for years and we loved to play in it," she recalls. "I have many memories of homecoming under the trees. We always had benches for people who just wanted to talk awhile under the oak trees."

Hagler will return to the church's annual homecoming on Sunday, July 19, to reminisce under the oaks. She'll be joined by other longtime Oak Grove members, including Dot Smith, 81, who considers homecoming nothing less than a celebration.

The oldest members of Oak Grove Congregational Christian Church look forward to homecoming under the trees on Sunday. Shown from left are Evelyn Hodnett, Dot Smith, Mildred Thompson, Mildred Hagler and Grady Lassetter.

"Coming back to Oak Grove is coming back to rejoice in the things you remembered as a young child," says Smith. "When you share a service and dinner-on-the-grounds with old friends, there's a rejoicing in your heart. Those things haven't died; we just don't always celebrate them."

Homecoming originated in the community, according to Smith, "when people would lay by their crops, then had an empty spell between them. They would have a week of evangelistic services, meet as neighbors and friends, eat and worship together, then go back to their regular jobs for the rest of summer. Homecoming became their day of celebration."

Oak Grove roots

Community resident Mary Joyner-Thompson published a history of Oak Grove's "First One Hundred Years" in 1999, tracing the church back to its roots. According to her history, the seeds for the new church were sown between 1890 and 1898 when preachers of various denominations "were kindhearted enough to come to the place and deliver the gospel to the hungry people."

One of those kindhearted, circuit riding preachers was the Rev. Hilliard W. Elder, a Columbus resident who visited the community with his wife. Neighbors met in a one-room, log school building to hear Rev. Elder's first sermon, entitled "The Cedars of Labanon." The congregants' overwhelming display of appreciation inspired the preacher to return whenever possible and, by the fall of 1898, he was a routine Sunday morning fixture at Oak Grove School.

In the spring of 1899 Elder, whom churchgoers considered "a swift carpenter as well as an able preacher," began working with residents to build a church near the schoolhouse. The preacher gained legendary status, becoming a Paul Bunyan/Big John-type hero to some of the elderly members who said "he actually cut every tree and sawed the lumber for the foundation of the church before breakfast," according to Joyner-Thompson's history.

The original church was built where the current church stands today, on Oak Grove Road, near its intersection with Tucker Road. The land was donated by Thomas Wesley Smith who operated Smith's Mill, a grist mill on nearby Turkey Creek. Undoubtedly, says church member Grady Lassetter, the church was positioned in its exact spot because of the oak trees.

"The only way you could cool something back then—and probably the reason the church was located where it was—was to give shade," says Lassetter. When considering where to construct homes or other buildings, he adds, people "would hunt a spring so they could get water and oak trees so they could have cooling."

The church was dedicated in April 1899 and membership grew to 348, making Oak Grove Congregational the premier gathering place in the community near Chipley, now Pine Mountain. In 1912, a tornado caused heavy damage to the building and members decided to build a new church at the same location. The new, and current, church was completed in 1914. The Rev. Elder led congregants through the second building project just as he'd done with the first and retired from his pastoral post in 1915.

Over the years, improvements at the church included landscaping to bring terraces to level ground and filling in the old baptismal pool. A cemetery was added in 1924 and a parsonage in 1946. In 1971, an annex was completed with Sunday School rooms, fellowship hall and a kitchen. For some 30 years, the church sponsored the annual Oak Grove Arts and Crafts Fair with funds supporting educational needs and community projects. In 1999, the country church at Oak Grove celebrated its centennial by erecting a cornerstone and burying a time capsule.

Precious memories

The trees at Oak Grove Church are red oak and white oak, according to Lassetter, who says several of the larger specimens were cut down or died over the years. More than half a century ago, landscaping to level the terraces included building up soil around the tree trunks, actions that church members now realize were not in the best interests of the oaks. Surprisingly, most of the trees survived that drastic alteration of environment.

"They're not all that big, but they've been there as long as the church," says Lassetter.

Smith remembers her mother speaking of the church's early days, when members convened under the oaks after Sunday morning services to watch buggy races.

"After they'd gone to church, young men would get in their buggies and race down Oak Grove Road to see who had the fastest horse," says Smith. "So many precious things have happened under those trees."

Among her most precious memories is the funeral for her husband, Virgil, whose eulogy last fall was held amidst the oaks.

“Virgil was such an outside person and for him I wanted to be under those trees that afternoon,” says Smith. “There was a table with his favorite things on it; he was a rabbit and bird hunter so we set his trophies, fox horn and hunting cap on the table.”

As the informal service got underway, the grieving widow sensed a peace she attributes to the trees, the sun, and the simplicity of being in nature.

“I never had seen the sun sparkle through those trees like it did on that day,” she says.

Years earlier, the Smiths had hosted their daughter Ruth’s wedding reception under those same oaks, with flower baskets and wind chimes hanging from the branches.

“Those trees,” says Smith, “it’s Oak Grove. That means something in my heart. My daddy and mother met and dated under those trees, and my grandmother and grandfather were under those trees. They have been such a blessing and so much a part of our lives.”

Coming home

Oak Grove’s pastor, the Rev. Linda Hawkins, will preach the homecoming service on Sunday. Afterwards, churchgoers will convene under the oaks for dinner-on-the-grounds.

Church members recently nominated their trees for inclusion on the Troup County Heritage Tree Register. Here, they reminisce under the shade of the oaks.

“We have an air conditioned basement, but still like to have homecoming dinner on the grounds,” says Lassetter.

“We tried having it inside one year,” Smith adds. “But when you go inside, you sit down in a chair and only talk with the people next to you. Outside, people will circulate and visit with each other more. They’ll gather on quilts or at tables, and there’s always a breeze. We found that rather than go indoors people want it just like it was when they first came here. So we eat outside, looking up at the church with the cross on it, and it just brings back all the memories.”