

*History Hangs On

(Continued from page 1.)

The number of worshippers is typically in the single digits, but they like to keep things simple, he said.

Even as the congregation has dwindled, Booth and others want to make sure its history is known. The church, its cemetery and the former site of The Acona School nearby are on the National Register of Historic Places, and a historic marker was added last year to educate curious passersby about their significance.

A statement submitted to include the sites on the National Register summed it up this way: “The Acona Church, Cemetery, and School are significant man-made buildings and sites which have survived to demonstrate the will of small, rural communities to overcome the economic hardships of the Civil War and create new civic and social forms that would bind the community together and make it viable.”

The name “Acona” comes from the Native Americans’ word for “Whoa,” which they heard stagecoach drivers shout to their horses as they came to a stop there.

The church building was constructed on 3 acres purchased from Mrs. A.T. Landfair for \$25 in 1874, with John Hamilton overseeing the work. Another half acre was deeded later. The church was on the first floor, and the second floor was occupied by the National Grange of the Order of Patrons of Husbandry (“the Grange”), a fraternal organization. The church drew members from the Sweetwater and Black Hawk churches, among others. By 1875, the Acona church had 86 members, and it and the Grange jointly owned the building. The cemetery was established in 1899, with plots selling for \$7 apiece and proceeds going toward upkeep. In 1916, a house was purchased for \$2,250 to serve as a parsonage.

In a 1960 history of the Acona community, Mrs. J.D. Williams wrote that the church was “the axis upon which the life of the community revolved” and “has been responsible for the high moral and spiritual tone for which the community is recognized.”

The church made a number of improvements over the years, including the rearrangement of the upstairs rooms to house classrooms and the addition of gas heat, electric lights, cabinets to store books and records, and upgrades to the parsonage.

The first school in Acona was in a log building and then was replaced in 1870 by another structure, named Woodlawn School and located about 2 miles south of Acona. Woodlawn closed when the Acona School was

built in 1903 next to the church. In 1910, the Downer and Cedar Gleen schools merged with the Acona School, creating the first consolidated school in the nation. In 1928, high school students from Acona began attending school in Lexington, and the elementary school students continued to attend Acona until it closed in 1944.

In the registration materials for the National Register, it was noted that historic schoolhouses had become rare and that the combination of a school, a postwar church and a cemetery also was rare.

Booth, 71, has a long family history in Acona. For 25 years, he has lived in a home built in the late 19th century that once was the residence of his great-grandfather, John Clifton Booth.

Cliff Booth lived in Tchula through first grade, and then his family moved to Newton. He remembers returning to Acona periodically as a boy to enjoy fishing and to spend time with his great-aunt, Quida Booth Downer, who taught at the school there and became a housewife after it closed. Her husband, Leland, worked in farming and had a country store with his brother. “They never left this hill,” he said. “Just loved Acona.”

Those trips also included worshipping at the Acona church.

After graduating from the University of Mississippi, Booth worked for an office supply company and later for Alcoa, traveling in six states as a district sales manager. He moved to Acona from Collierville, Tennessee, 25 years ago because the company allowed him to work out of his home. After all, he said, “There’s been a Booth in that house for 100

years. ... I figured if I didn’t move back and keep the run going of years with a family member being in there, they might come back and haunt me.”

When he attended services at Acona United Methodist as a child, there would be 30 to 40 people there. When he returned, about 20 people came. Now, he said, “we’re down to six.”

He remembers when the church celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1974: “They had 600 people here. They had so many people, they had seating and tents and loudspeakers out there.”

The annual homecoming in April does still typically draw about 100 people from miles around. There’s a potluck meal, and they have had good speakers including Paul Ott, Green Acres actor Tom Lester and Miss Mississippi. Booth remembers Lester telling the younger people in his audience how lucky they were to be at a type of gathering that doesn’t happen much anymore.

Homecoming also is an essential fundraiser; they pass around a special plate to collect donations for the church, cemetery and schoolhouse building as they share memories.

“We still have younger people coming to homecoming, which is a good sign,” Booth said. “The older ones are dying off, but we still have younger ones come.”

He said the church also hosts one wedding a year, on average.

The building that once served as the church parsonage was sold years ago, and the parsonage now is in Black Hawk. The pastor of Acona United Methodist also serves as pastor of Methodist churches in Enon and Black Hawk. The current pastor, Tommy Stephenson, lives



Acona United Methodist Church has a small but dedicated congregation.
(Photo by Johnny Jennings)

in Charleston, so the parsonage building is used for other purposes, including Bible study.

Stephenson started work June 30. He is officially retired from ministry but didn’t want to quit altogether, so he made himself available for any opening within reasonable driving distance of his home. The district superintendent chose him to lead Acona United Methodist.

Stephenson, 69, said he knew nothing about Acona before he was appointed, but he grew up in Alabama and has plenty of experience with small-town churches.

“I feel right at home out in the country with these folks,” he said.

He said he’s still learning people’s names at the various churches and has learned some of the history of the Acona church.

He also is looking forward

to homecoming, having been told that it attracts an overflow crowd to a church without air conditioning.

“The people have been so good to us, and we’ve just grown to love all of them,” he said.

Booth, who retired from Alcoa in 2009, has used his sales skills to convince people to give to his church over the years. He also has pitched in to keep the place up, including cutting the grass every week. But he knows it will be expensive if someone has to be paid to maintain the property when he is no longer able.

“You wonder who’s going to take care of all this when we’re gone,” he said. “It drives me crazy.”

He has worked to bring more attention to the Acona buildings’ history. Soon after he returned to the area, he suggested trying to have

them placed on the National Register of Historic Places, which was accomplished with the aid of former state Rep. Mary Ann Stevens and others.

He also brought up the idea of having a historical marker placed there. “I said, ‘We need to get a sign before we’re gone. ... People stop here all the time and just look at this church and everything, and they have no idea that’s the oldest consolidated schoolhouse.’”

Different people contributed the money needed, and the marker was added during homecoming last April.

Booth said he’s thankful that Acona United Methodist has endured all this time and continues to brighten the area.

“You’re just riding out here seeing nothing, and you come on this beautiful church,” he said.

IN AND AROUND LEXINGTON

BY LEONA (LENA) FIELDS



The Senior Citizens Feeding Site at the Multi-Purpose Complex in Lexington wasn’t opened for food on Wednesday, January 29, due to a gas leak at the place the food is cooked at. Someone got the wrong understanding about the place and said there was a gas leak at the Multi-Purpose Complex. The Multi-Purpose Complex did not have a gas leak.

Mrs. Limmie Townsend is in the hospital. But I heard she’s doing pretty good.

Mrs. Gloria Benson-Remus was funeralized at Porter’s Funeral Home Chapel on Thursday, January 30. The repass was held at Union Grove. M.B. Church. However, she was a number one member of the St. John C.M.E. Church.

Pauline Hoover-Scott (I hope I have the name right) passed recently. She was funeralized Saturday, February 1, at Holy Hill Chapel at Saints Academy/College in Lexington. She lived in Tennessee.

Mattie Walden-Brown was funeralized Saturday, January 25.

Burnice (Bunny) McGee

passed. Some or one of her children came and got her before she passed. So this is late news to some people. But I just heard about her passing last week.

Beverly Randle, Jr.’s funeral was Saturday, February

1, at Porter’s Funeral Home Chapel in Lexington.

On Friday, January 31, a group of seniors from the Lexington Feeding Site went to see Lula Pearl Benford in the Durant nursing home. She’s doing much better than she was the last time we visited her. Her daughter Mary is in the same room with her.



The old schoolhouse in Acona serves as the gathering spot every April for a homecoming celebration of families with roots in that community.

(Photo by Johnny Jennings)



Orin Howell showed the Reserve Grand Champion Lamb in the 2020 Holmes County 4-H Livestock Show held Saturday, January 25 at the Holmes County Livestock Barn in Lexington.
(Photo by Julie Ellison)