

The Story of Otterbein Church

(As Told By: Mary M. Oakley)

In 1905, the Civil War had been over a scant forty years. This area belonged to the Federal Government. There were towns, communities, a few cemeteries, schools, and churches; A criss cross of railroad tracks, and squared section lines, was completed by curved creeks and rivers, which meandered at will, moving their waters, always down hill. There were fords, and ferries to cross the waters, but very few bridges. There was Thompson's Ferry and Island Ford & Ferry to the south over the river, and other crossings at logical spots. There were few roads, but people mostly used the old trails. In this area the main trail was the Texas Road, also called Military Road, because of its use in moving soldiers and equipment during the Civil War. The Texas Road went through the state, north to south, angling a little west, from the northeast corner, near Miami, to the Red River, just west of Durant. This old trail, as I understand it, went beside the old church, through Miss Rachel Roger's 20 acre allotment, past her house, spring and campground, and angled south/southwest until it descended into Big Cabin Creek. The old roadway was about half way between Military Cemetery, and the land where our Otterbein Church parsonage is now located, and went nearly straight west at this point. Still angling southwest, and going downstream, the trail comes out of the ford. (The ford area is usually low water, but sometimes is on dry land.) On the west side of the creek, is the site where several battles were fought, during the Civil War, one being possibly the most decisive victory for the South in the whole war. But there were casualties too, that's how the Military Cemetery got started, with the eleven unknown/unclaimed soldiers, buried on the far west side.

The Missouri Kansas & Texas "Katy" rail road tracks ran west of here as close as Adair, Big Cabin and Vinita. Nearby towns were Pensacola, Ketchum, Vinita, Spavinaw, and Strang. *There were no towns, named Langley, Disney, nor Tia Juana, as Grand River was still roaring free.* A few people had motor cars, but for the most part, buggies, hacks, surreys, wagons, and other horse and mule drawn conveyances were still the norm; as was walking. With these modes of travel, your God, family, neighbors, and your community, were nearly the most important thing in your life. There were churches, mostly in (subscription) school houses or people's homes, and preachers too, but sometimes both were few and far between. Circuit riding preachers sometimes filled the void, doing revivals, marriages, baptisms and other services, as they came by. But the land was growing, people were moving in, and more community roots were needed. Miss Rogers, ran "Aunt" Rachel Roger's school, and the Carselowey school was active, but more preachers and teachers were needed.

By late 1907, what is now Oklahoma was still the twin territories and "No Man's Land". The area where the church is now located was known as the Delaware District, Cherokee Nation, Indian Territory. The lands had been surveyed by the United States Government. The Dawes Commission had finished its work of enrolling and certifying claims of eligible Indians, Adopted Whites, and Freedmen for parcels of land to be given to them in treaty agreements. The final rolls had closed in May 1906 and parcels of "allotment land" were given to those who were eligible. Improvements were added to, and going up daily. Prior to receiving the allotment lands, the Indians, Intruders, and Whites With Permits had owned their improvements, but not the land. Now they owned it too. The land what is now Otterbein Church was first allotted to Eliza Rogers, Roll # F1990. She was a freedman. There was a house on the corner, where the church is now, when she got the land. Three members of the Nipp family (Joseph, Ella & Henry F. Nipp) had their acreage north of the church. This family has been in the area a long time. Some of their family are among the early burials at Military Cemetery, with Mrs. Emely Nipp dying on April 2, 1873, and having the oldest marked burial there.

On November 16, 1907 Oklahoma became a state. Some say there was a revival going on here, at that time, during the statehood celebrations, which was the actual beginning of this church. This I do not know, and can not prove one way or the other. But it is possible. Tradition has it, that the next summer, in 1908, a revival was held at Miss Roger's campground, and a brush arbor was built to house the worshipers. Log benches were also made for seating, after the tree limbs were trimmed off, to place on top of the arbor to provide shade and shelter from the weather. All winter, when the weather wasn't too bad, the arbor was used for preaching, teaching and fellowship. Even as the cold weather settled in, and the now dry leaves

fell through the roof, leaving bare limbs, the people still came. They sought the word of God with the vigor of hearty country people. Winter was no match for hearing God's word, and feeling Christian love. The people tried to meet during the milder days. When spring time came, and the tree sprouts grew leaves, someone put new branches on the roof. Thus, the brush arbor roof was renewed several times over the summer, as needed. Services continued. By winter time, which looked to be much harsher than the last year's was, there was talk of a permanent church. Reverend Virgil Megill was evidently preaching some at the revival, for when the church was established, he was our first minister. Church was held in a log storehouse, on Miss Rogers' place for two years. Rev. Megill was the only pastor we had while worshipping there.

In 1910 the Military School House was built. As soon as it was finished, the church services were moved there. It was much warmer than the old log building, but on that corner, the wind always blew. (It still does.) Reverend Megill, moved on, and two more pastors O. G. Huling, in 1910 and J. A. Sanders, in 1911 came, each one lasting a year. In 1912 the Kansas Oklahoma & Gulf "Kong" rail road tracks were laid a mile and a quarter south of the church. They ran between Ketchum and Pensacola. In June 1912, came a new pastor, W. H. Proffit. He served before, and all through the war, and stayed five years. During this time, or thereabouts, there was a Mrs. Harp who gave funds to the church from her egg and chicken money to keep it going. Once, during a spell when the crops weren't doing too good, she was said to have prayed "God, you know we need rain and a harvest. She prayed on then said "And Lord, you know I just can't raise chickens on weeds and water."

In 1918 the war to end all wars was ended. This war is now called World War I. That same year, C. D. Phend became our new minister. In these early years, Longview, Utopia, Carselowey, & Military School Houses also housed the four churches by the same names. A "Circuit Preacher" for the United Brethren Church, served them all. Later on, Longview & Utopia (On the west side of Big Cabin Creek) and Carselowey & Military (On the east side of Big Cabin Creek) were served together.

I think the "Two-Point Charge" of serving the two churches started in the 1920's with either Rev. T. A. Tripp, Rev. Jacob Tyson, or Rev. J. F. Wick. Between 1930 and 1940 there were five ministers who served the church. J. A. Moore, Thomas McDonald, W. B. Gilliland, Marvin Monroe, Roderick Gray. Reverend Roy E. Trent, came in 1940, and preached through World War II, and to the beginning of the Korean conflict, in 1951. (I still call it the Korean War). Reverend Trent was the preacher here when the United Brethren Church in Christ joined with the Evangelical Church to become the Evangelical Brethren Church, in 1946. I believe this church was called Otterbein United Brethren Church at that time. Some of the old timers, including Wilma (Millikan) Sloan and Bernice (Thompson) Harrison remembered Rev. Trent and his wife, of whom they were very fond. Reverend W. Eugene "Gene" Kay became licensed to preach in October 1944. He came, as a young preacher, about 26 years old, to our minister church the first time on the first Sunday of June 1951. Before Rev. Kay was here a full year, the Military School closed, and he was instrumental, with the church purchasing the building so we could continue having services here on "our" corner. Rev. Gene Kay stayed until 1954, then we had the Reverends Milton Miller, C. F. Williamson, John A. Hogan, Orville Palmer, and Wesley White. In April 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Church joined to become the United Methodist Church. We became the Otterbein United Methodist Church at that time. From June 1968 through June of 1985, Reverend Howard Young, and Reverend Jack Nester served. It was during this time, that the bell was stolen from the old church belfry. Even though it was surmised, who had taken it, the bell was never recovered. Another bell was placed in the belfry, but it has a quiet, low ring. Nothing like the old schoolhouse bell that rang loudly into the prairie winds, to be heard for miles. During this seventeen year span, Otterbein Church and Ketchum United Methodist Church, five miles away, shared the two ministers. Both had churches and fellowship halls, but Ketchum had a parsonage then, so it was the main church. Then, Reverend Eugene Kay retired from the full time ministry on June 1, 1985. He came back home to Mayes County, Oklahoma. Reverend Gene bought his uncle's house, on the west side of Cabin Creek, near Ghormley Cemetery and Utopia Church, and lived there. On the first Sunday in June, following his "retirement", he was in the pulpit at Otterbein, as a "part-time" pastor. He would serve this church for the next twenty years. For nine years, Reverend Kay, his wife Esther, and the congregation worshiped in the old school house building, as they gathered funds for a new church building. From groundbreaking in April 1994, until completion June 1995, the new church building grew quickly from a dream to a reality. Services were held in the new building on the second Sunday of December 1994. The building was formally dedicated on June 4, 1995, as it was completely paid for, and could not be dedicated, until it was. The first funeral in the new sanctuary was Tom Carroll's. He had fervently wished that his funeral be held in the new church, and he lived until it could be. As soon

as possible, the old church/school building was re-fitted for a Fellowship Hall and Sunday School. A room, with a kitchen and restrooms, had been added a few years before, on the south side of the old schoolhouse. New cabinets and appliances were added in the 1990's. There, the women quilted and did all things kitchen related. They sewed for those in need and gathered stuff for special projects. Church and funeral dinners were held there, UMW too. Wedding receptions, baby showers, bridal shares and family events were shared. The youth spent many hours there, playing games, eating, having youth programs, making ice cream, and learning about God and life. If the door was open, Reverend Gene Kay was there. Back when my children were in youth, several of us brave parents, had an all night, youth "Lock-In". We did it not once, but twice. I slept in front of the old double doors on the front of the old school house, so that the kids couldn't sneak in or out during the night. I almost froze that first year, with cold wind whistling under my sleeping bag. The second year, I brought a beach towel, to stuff in the crack under the doors. (That room was torn down, after the new fellowship hall building was built. Later on, the big double doors were replaced. Bill Simms put in one large steel door in their place, and the guys framed it in snugly. The old Military School house still stands, worn, but straight and proud, as of July 2019).

It was during this time that I started going to church at Otterbein. I was so impressed with the friendliness of the people, and the sheer joy they imparted to be able to be here. Ruby (Comer) Bogle was the first one to welcome me, and she did so with open arms. Ten other people were not far behind. At that time, the church was largely run by volunteers. The cleaning was done by twelve ladies (two to a month), with one big cleaning in August of every year, when everybody participated. The Paraments were changed as the church calendar dictates, by the ladies. Helen Walker made up all the communion elements, and cleaned them up afterward. The grass was cut, and items fixed by volunteers. The liturgist, acolytes, servers and collectors were volunteers. Easter Lilies and Poinsettias appeared at the proper time, with cards on them, as to who their dedications and remembrances were for. Johnnie Epperson even made new gold trimmed white acolyte robes from size two to twenty, No charge. Then when I "let the cat out of the bag" that she could play the organ, Esther nabbed her. The organ was out of tune, but not for long. So Johnnie "volunteered" to play. We enjoyed her beautiful music, until she had the audacity to move off to Texas, and took her fingers, and foot pedaling feet with her! For several years, during the early to late 2000's, and maybe beyond, we also had a church newsletter. The newsletter helped us keep up with each other and the events of the church. Our church always has had an abundance of willing workers. It took me years to see what all was being done behind the scene, and find out *who was doing it*. I'm sure I never caught on to all of it.

Time passed. In 2001, we celebrated 93 Years. The "Home Coming Committee" consisted of Marilyn Blackmon, Jim and Johnnie Epperson, Rev. Gene Kay, Lura Nugent, Mary Oakley, Wilma Sloan, Betty Storey, and Bernice Harrison as consultant. The next year we celebrated 94 years with the same committee. But his was Bernice's last year, She passed away September 16, 2002. Also in 2002, Rev. Kay taught a Confirmation Class. It may have been his last one. On October 13, 2002, Kyndall Rachelle Ray, age 12; Kevin Leon Oakley, age 14; Leigha Marie Midgett, age 13; and Brandi Lynn Fink, age 12; were welcomed as full church members. At the same time the Otterbein members were gathering money to build the a new parsonage. Bernice Harrison had donated the land, on the bluff side of Cabin Creek, south of Military Cemetery, and we were off and running. By early 2004 the new parsonage was finished. Open house was May 2, 2004, and Floyd Wheeler baked the cookies!

By late 2003, Reverend Kay's health had started to become an issue. On April 17, 2004, Reverend James "Jim" Bradford, and his wife Dianna accepted the position for Jim as our new minister. They came from Kingfisher, Oklahoma. Though in his 50's, Reverend Jim was a new minister, and this was his first pastorate. They were the first family to occupy the new parsonage. Reverend Gene was here to mentor him during the early months, as were several long time members, but our oldest church member, Lura (Griffin) Nugent had died during the week previous to his arrival. Reverend Bradford's appointment began June 13, 2004. For the past twenty-five years, we have had our own minister for Otterbein. We still do. But, we still share ministers. Reverend Jim Bradford pastors Otterbein United Methodist Church, with faith and compassion. His wife, Dianna Bradford, now pastors the Ketchum Methodist Church, with love and devotion. So continues the "circle of life" in our church. In they year 2011 A. D., our Otterbein United Methodist Church is celebrating another homecoming. One hundred and three years now. Welcome Everyone! HAPPY HOMECOMING 2011 - "And Many More".

Thanks for the Memories,
Mary M. Oakley
copyright August 10, 2011

Epilog:

Now, it is 2019. Our 111th HOMECOMING. The story continues. Though I (Mary Oakley) am no longer the keeper of the Church History, nor part of the Homecoming Committee. I was asked to update my story of our church, that celebrated our 103rd year and homecoming in 2011, to share with you. Memories are sacred, and everybody has a story. I am honored to do so. The Update begins

Otterbein Church remains. The only thing constant is change, and we have had it. We built a new fellowship Hall, west of the church and tore the old one down, while Jim Bradford was minister. The new Hall is new, tight and sturdy, but it has no windows. The old Hall had twelve windows, and was full of light with a view of the countryside. The old Fellowship Hall was named for Gene Kay; The new one is dedicated to the late Bill Sloan, a local boy, from Big Cabin, OK, who was involved with the construction of the new Hall, in every way. In May 2015, Revered Jim Bradford, and wife Dianna, were assigned to a two-church charge, in southwestern, Oklahoma, near the Red River (and closer to Texas, where their family was). Their new churches were at Randlett, in Cotton County, and Grandfield, in adjoining Tillman County.

But we were never without a minister. The first Sunday of June, 2015, Otterbein welcomed a new preacher, to continue the history of Otterbein Church. And ... Pastor Benjamin J. Pascoe, was new in every sense of the word. Pastor Ben favored a black shirt, trousers, and a horizontal white clerical collar, as his church attire. A single man, fresh out of seminary, he brought new life, hope, vibrancy, and laughter. As city boy, suddenly thrust into the country sticks, it was quite an adjustment. In fact, on the way to move into the parsonage, he was met by a cow. Yep, a full grown cow, standing in his yard. Somebody else had to make her leave. The country noises were foreign to his ears too, but he adapted. He even managed not to blow up the new fellowship hall, when he found the kitchen was filled with propane, from an un-lit burner! Pastor Ben grew with us, and we with him, as he finished his training, and was soon able to give communion, officiate weddings, and administer the rites of the church. His sermons were new too. He spent days writing his message, as he rattled around that big old parsonage, all by himself. Sermons, diligently researched, thought provoking, and with a twist, of "what?", as he and the congregation considered a different angle on things, As he preached. From chasing tornadoes, to rock bands and different music, I often had to ask myself, "What did I just hear?". I will always remember the sermon with the big light saber, like they had in "Star Wars", being slashed through the air at the pulpit. That is when he informed the congregation that "Star Wars, were just Cowboys and Indians in Space". He also temporarily re-instated the annual Weenie Roast and Hay Ride that had brought the young and old together, each October. The Weenie Roast and Hay Ride "rode into the sunset" again, after being held twice. He also had the congregation gather in front of the old church for a group photo. The last one taken, to my knowledge. Pastor Ben, stayed just two years, before he was suddenly offered a new position at an Elk City Methodist Church, in central/western Oklahoma. He had to answer immediately, so he quickly accepted. It was back to the city life, he wanted, but I know he carried a part of Otterbein with him. It was large step into the world for Pastor Ben, and another small beginning for Otterbein.

In June 2017, Pastor Don Baker and his wife Debbie, came to our congregation. Their farm is in LeFlore County, Oklahoma, near Heavener. He soon learned that his western shirts, jeans, bolo ties, and cowboy boots, were perfect attire for this area; and this country church. Pastor Don, was a newly educated preacher too. He had lived all over the United States, from New York to California, and places in between. He had worked law enforcement, and several other types of jobs, all of which helped him connect the dots in the big picture of his life, and wind up as the 26th minister at Otterbein Church, at the corner of East 360 Road & South 4440 Road, in rural Mayes County, Oklahoma.

As I said, Otterbein Church remains, but Spavinaw Methodist Church and Ketchum United Methodist Church are no more. The buildings still stand. Spavinaw's, without a bell and belfry now, after being slapped by a tornado. And Ketchum's sold, and now in private hands. The people who made up those church's congregations spend their Sundays in different places now. Several are now at Otterbein Church, where they were welcomed as I was, with open arms, and abundant love.

At this Homecoming 2019, we and the church celebrate over 11 decades. Jeannie Brown plays the piano and organ. She and her husband Ross, are newer members, but he is one of the oldest members of our congregation. We have a small choir, together, with Jeannie's playing, the congregation singing, we all make joyful music each Sunday; The names and faces of regular attendees at Otterbein have changed much over the past twenty-four years, that I have been there. But there are at least four family members, of the founding members of our church, who attend regularly. Don and Debbie remain with Otterbein, ministering to the sick, comforting the grieving, helping the needy, as well as laughing and rejoicing with the congregation. A lot of people in our congregation have been ailing, hurting, recovering from surgery, weathering troubles, or had life changing events, since Pastor Don came aboard. His car odometer has clicked over many miles, visiting hospitals, and parishioners. Debbie Baker crochets and knits beautiful things to share, but Don is nearly all thumbs, on needlework, so Debbie doesn't let him help much. Their children and grandchildren visit on a regular basis. Granddaughter, Elizabeth, even spent one semester with us, going to school at Adair. The Bakers are indeed part of our church family.

As we continue to use the pencils, that represent our lives to "connect the dots" of our days and experiences; we touch the essence of people and places; together, and separately; while each of us are tracing a big picture, in an abundant and eventful life; that only God Can see.

Once Again, Thanks for the Memories,

Mary M. Oakley

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