

Mars Hill Log Church

By PEARL RUPE HARNES

A church bell rang out for the first time in Wapello county, Iowa, from a Congregational church in Ottumwa, about 1853. It was calling men in their freshly blackened boots; women in their best silk—or calico—dresses, and children with shining, scrubbed faces together for holy worship on Sunday morning. It was not the first church in the county, though the first church, formed at Agency, was of the Congregational denomination and dates from about 1846, being organized by the Rev. Spaulding, who arrived in the county about 1843. Also he was instrumental in promoting the Ottumwa church, which was the first to erect a belfry and support a bell.

It was in 1853, that the Presbyterian group and the Baptist people obtained the joint occupancy of a "hall," which was reached by a rickety stair, and began holding services of their respective denominations; in 1844 to 1949, the Methodists and Catholics were beginning to build churches in the county at Ottumwa and Kirksville. All these have been razed and replaced by imposing, modern structures where impressive services are held regularly.

While this early activity was going on, and the embryo congregations were growing, over in the hills, in the southmost portion of the county, and in the north edge of Davis county, along Soap creek where transportation was difficult and the roads little more than cow paths, there were quiet, simple folk who considered their "homespun" and "hickory" clothing unfit apparel for "town churches," yet they loved God and accepted Christ as their Savior. In this community there was no place for religious meetings except in the homes which were, usually one-room log cabins. God had given this section of the state a woman of

sterling qualities and high ideals whose name was Barbara Clark.

She owned some land on which a tiny cemetery had already been started; the oldest stone bearing the date of 1846. An ideal spot, where drainage was no problem in the days of crude wooden boxes—often constructed by kind neighborly hands which afterwards “dug” and shaped the unlined graves. Here, the rising sun early kissed the little mounds; the last glow of evening hovered like a gentle benediction. It was of this land that Barbara Clark said:

For and in consideration of the Regard and esteem I have for Christianity and benevolent institutions, I hereby convey to A. Smock, S. A. Monroe, and A. Clark, the Trustees of the Missionary Baptist Church at Mars Hall, and to their successors in office the following tract of Land & described by meets & bounds as follows, to wit. Commencing at the South East corner of the South West quarter of the South East quarter of Section Thirty Three (33) in Township Seventy-one (71) Range thirteen west, thence north Thirteen Rods thence Due West Eighteen & a half rods thence Due South Thirteen rods to South line of said Section Thence East along Said Section Line Eighteen & a half rods to the place of beginning & being in the State of Iowa & Wapello County to have & to hold the Same for the use of the said Baptist Church as long as they Shall continue for the use of said lot for a church Lot & bury-ground. And Warrant the Title against all persons whosoever. In Testimony thereof I have hereunto set my hand and seal this 16th day of May A D 1857.

(Signed) BARBARA CLARK

This deed was duly acknowledged by a Justice of the peace, on the same date, and was recorded in the recorder's office of Wapello county, May 29, 1857, by A. F. Hoddy, Deputy Recorder.

LOCAL WORKERS ERECTED CHURCH

Soon, very soon, thereafter, volunteer workers cut and hewed massive timbers from the surrounding woods to build a church edifice, which is still standing, twenty-eight feet long; twenty-six feet wide, and measuring nine feet-nine inches to the eaves; requiring nine large logs and one of fence-post dimensions to attain this height, on the above described land.

The logs were hewn square and laid end-on-end,

with morticed corners. The logs bear witness today of the tools and methods used. The cracks between were "chinked and daubed." The first roof was of clapboards, and there was a "puncheon" floor. The door was of native lumber, sawed at a mill in the neighborhood. The roof, door and floor have been repaired and replaced, but the same old logs are there, with two windows, of twelve panes each, on each side for light and air.

The original heating plant was a fireplace built of stone hauled from the Des Moines river near the Agency ford. In later years a stove was installed.

To this place, from all directions, came the Clarks, Smocks, Donaldsons, Rupes, Monroes, Pedens, Hales, Headys, and many on foot, horseback, in farm wagons, and perhaps some were riding in ox-carts, to offer up sincere prayers and praise to their Maker. Many revivals have been held here by various groups of Protestant churches, and many a romance ripened into marriage, as he walked her home from church; this pioneer log church.

This church has been known as "Mars Hill," though in the deed record it is named "Mars Hall." Either name seems to be fitting, and whether it is rightly called "Hill" or "Hall," its rich history remains the same.

ONCE SHELTERED RUNAWAY SLAVES

A Davis County History offers us the legend that, "During the Civil War the building was used as one of the hiding places of escaped slaves and was one of the stopping places of the underground railway system used by the Northerners to aid negroes in escaping from their masters. One old colored man, named Jones, of Albia, who for three terms held a position in the cloak room of the Iowa senate was one of the number."

It never had a bell to call people to worship, but from the congregation of this pioneer structure—sturdy as the hands that built it—went forth some thirty-five young men to battle in the great Civil War

which tested our Nation's strength. Some returned to till the surrounding soil; others only to seek a last resting place in the shade of the oaks, pines and spruce where many of their comrades in arms later joined them.

Services were held in this log church, Memorial Day, 1953. It was a later—much later—generation which filled the “pews” (homemade benches) and there was string music to take the place of the now silent and dilapidated organ, which served for many years, and still sits in the corner, but the “Amens” and the “Praise His Names” were not new, and will never be old. The breezes through the pine trees must have been whispering the same Psalms as of yore. Little American flags proudly fluttered in the tall, tall grass on the little mounds in the cemetery; grass unmolested by scythe or sickle.

The road there is passable, in dry weather, and the building may be entered at any time, the latest known “latch” on the door being an ordinary twine string tied through what remains of a hasp. Inside is a little table. Perhaps it was called a “stand” in the long ago. It has served as a pulpit for many, many years, and on it is a registration book where people who visit this historical shrine may sign their names. Under date of July 1954, there are signatures of men and women from surrounding states and Canada.

Above the pulpit is a hand-printed sign asking all to “please” help keep it as good as it is, and not add to the destruction.

There has been no organized effort made for the preservation of the building, or the perpetual care of the cemetery. There is no sexton to open new graves, but the neighbors still serve. Over the years, repairs have been made by subscription taken up by some of the more interested residents of the community who have gone ahead with the meager replacements. Natural deterioration has now definitely set in, and the storms of many years have left marks, yet it is a spot to which people seem to gravitate. How much longer its rug-

ged, friendly, sacred walls can offer a welcome is problematical—in its present state of disrepair. The building is material, or is it?

NEW MARS HILL ROAD

The Wapello county supervisors have constructed a road to Mars Hill chapel, according to the *Ottumwa Courier*. The chapel is a log church, built more than 100 years ago and believed to be one of the oldest and largest log churches existing in the country today. Although it is only one room, it is a large room. The native oak and walnut logs are in a fair state of preservation. For the past 25 years, access to the remote chapel on the Wapello-Davis county line was only by foot. However, a couple of years ago Davis county opened a roadway to the chapel. Now Wapello county has made a road, giving access to the rustic church from both directions.

Iowa Has Nearly a Million

In Iowa, again this year, (1954), many communities are observing the centennial of their founding. The telephone hasn't been around that long. But since it first came to Iowa in 1878, it has been one of the state's best "citizens." It has served the needs of practically every community—a partner in the progress of the state. The growth of the telephone is, in itself, a measure of its popularity. Today, there are 549,200 Bell telephones in Iowa—over a quarter of a million more than 10 years ago—and 2,700,000 calls are made each day. In addition, there are 346,250 telephones served by other telephone companies, a total of 895,450 telephones serving the people of Iowa.—N. W. Bell Telephone Bulletin.

How Honor Comes

No person was ever honored for what he received. Honor has been the reward for what he gave.—Calvin Coolidge.

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