

Antioch School was first church building

By L.S. WALKER

One might wonder what railroads and religion has to do with the creation and building of a town. Well, in the case of Picayune, which was first called "Bailey Switch," they had much to do with it.

This had been a part of Hancock County since it was formed in 1812. It did not become a part of Pearl River County until the county was carved out of Hancock and Marion Counties by act of the state legislature in 1890.

The School History of Mississippi, written in 1900 by F.L. Riley says: "Between 1882 and 1890 more railroads were built in the state than had been built in the 50 preceeding years."

Captain W.H. Hardy, the builder of the cities of Hattiesburg and Gulfport, and a fervent and devoted leader among Mississippi Baptist, was a builder of railroads. He built the Southern Railroad, then known as the New Orleans and Northeastern Railroad, from New Orleans north through the tall virgin pine forest of south Mississippi to Hattiesburg, Laurel, Meridian and points north. Work on the railroad was continuous from about 1881 through 1885.

Up until this time the closest place for the people of this immediate area to worship was Palestine Baptist Church which had been established in 1842 on the old Columbia-to-Gainesville road about a mile or so west of what is now Nicholson. It is now known as Old Palestine on the Nicholson to Jackson Landing road. The only other nearby churches were Union Baptist Church at Caesar (first named Center), Pine Grove Baptist Church at Yamacraw, Henleyfield Baptist Church, and Byrd Chapel Methodist Church just north of Henleyfield. There were a few others more distantly removed from the area. The only churches known to this section of south Mississippi up to that time were Baptist or Methodist.

This was an interesting, challenging, but frustrating and trying period of history in Mississippi and all the south. Only about 16 years after the Civil War, followed by the hardships and repression of reconstruction and Carpetbagger government in the state. The unpleasant memory of the disastrous yellow fever epidemic of 1878, and the presence of federal troops in the state as a "conquered province" did not end until 1877.

In early 1881, a camp for the railroad construction workers and their families was established on the south bank of Hobolochitto Creek just on the east side of where the new railroad bed would be built. This was along about where old highway 11 (north Harvey Avenue) approaches the south end of the old Hobolochitto Creek bridge, which has since been removed.

A building was provided for a school house. It seemed somewhat providential that the first teacher of the school would be a man by the name of James Gordon Sibley who was also an ordained Baptist minister. Brother Sibley, being the dedicated servant of God he was, set to work immediately to establish a Sunday School. Sunday School was conducted each Lord's Day in the school house.

Soon thereafter, Bro. Sibley was joined by an elderly minister by the name of W.H. "Billy" Varnado who had come to this part of the country about 1840 from Pike County to lead in the work of establishing all the Baptist churches existing in the area up to that time. He also led in organizing the Hobolochitto Baptist Association in 1856.

These two ministers joined to establish a mission which was soon established as a New Testament church with worship, or as some were accustomed to saying, "preaching" services once each month. The new church became Picayune's first church, and was given the Biblical name of Antioch.

After several years the church moved out of the school

building, which also became known as Antioch school, and erected a house of worship a short distance to the east where the Antioch cemetery is still maintained by the city of Picayune on east Eighth Street at the north end of North Jackson Avenue.

Mrs. Myrtie (Stockstill) Weaver who still resides at her home 322 Third Avenue in east Picayune, told me just recently, that she attended the old Antioch school after the turn of the century. Brother Sibley had, by this time left to teach school elsewhere-at Aaron Academy and Anner, and a dashing young man from South Carolina, by the name of Thomas J. Weaver, had come to teach. Myrtie and her teacher fell in love, and were married in 1905. She was 17 and he was 27. The late T.J. Weaver became a prominent attorney-at-law in Picayune and Pearl River County until his death several years ago.

When the railroad was completed and trains began running about 1885, a siding and a platform was built along the tracks to accommodate the turpentine and resin business of J.W. Simmons who had given the land for the railroad terminal here. It became known as Bailey Switch.

I suppose this could be called the story of "The Baptist and Bailey Switch." The town took its name later after the New Orleans daily paper, The Times-Picayune.

Before moving from this area, Brother Sibley pastored other churches, including Henleyfield, Pine Grove, Union(Caesar), Napoleon and Logtown.

Preacher Sibley, while pastoring there, became widely known and remembered as the man who prayed at the public hanging of a man in Columbia by the name of Will Purvis, who was convicted for murder. Purvis said to the last that he was innocent, and believed he would never hang for a crime he did not commit. Sibley prayed while the large gathering listened intently. He asked God to spare the life of this man if he was not guilty. After the prayer, Purvis stood hooded on the gallows. The trap was released, and he dropped to the earth while the unravelling rope swung loose in the air.

An attempt to put him back on the gallows was thwarted when Sibley cried out; "You cannot hang him again. That is against the law!" The vast gathering of citizens was with Sibley. They believed! Purvis was carried back to jail.

His sentence was later commuted to life in prison. He remained in the state penitentiary until the man who actually committed the murder confessed it on his death bed, and Purvis was released. I can well remember, as a small boy, hearing Will Purvis relate his life story at the old Fornea Theatre in Picayune before he died.

Bro. J.G. Sibley, as he was known in this part of the country, has a daughter, Mrs. Ocie Harris, who resides at this time at 712 2nd Ave. W, in Picayune.

The church was the scene of many happy experiences. The fellowship was warm and inspiring. However, the growth of the young church in numbers was slow due to the fact that there were not many people in the immediate vicinity then. The Minutes of the Hobolochitto Baptist Association of 1887 shows only 35 members on the church membership roll.

During these early years the church held worship, or, as most became accustomed to saying, "preaching" service once a month on Saturday before each first Sunday of the month. Later on regular worship services twice each month with Sunday School every Sunday. This schedule was continued until the church ceased to exist during the depression about 1933.

Along about 1942 and 1943 I talked a number of times with Mr.

Henry Howard, a life-long member of the church, about the old church and what was the real cause of its demise. There were several factors which contributed to the death of the old church, according to Mr. Howard.

Due to the way the city had developed, a large negro section, known as "Bailey Quarters," had grown up between the depot the center of town, and the church. The members never could agree on relocating the church. Then, in 1904 the First Baptist Church of Picayune was organized under the leadership of the late Rev. W.I. Williams. Many of the members had gone into the fellowship of First Baptist. The old building being in a rather bad state of repair, was demolished to make way for a new building which was never built. Thus, old Antioch, Picayune's first church, had lasted from about 1881 to 1933.

The church was never officially disbanded. Some of the few remaining members, including some of the Howards, Mitchells, and possible others, were received into the fellowship of a new church which was organized on east Canal Street in Picayune in 1945 under the leadership of this writer. The new church was given the name of Antioch to memorialize the name of old Antioch, Picayune's first church.

As a teen-age boy, I well recall passing the old church on my happy way to the old "Antioch swimmin hole" on Hobolochitto Creek, or "Boley" as we called, just down the hill back of the church.

On the church membership roll could be found such names of families familiar to this area of present as well as bygone days. Names such as Mitchell, Warden, Harris, Tate, Howard, McGehee, Herrin, Culpepper, Davis, Dillard, Stockstill, Varnado, Gray, Watts, Wages, Bennett, Smith and others.

Among the pastors in addition to Sibley and Varnado, were Thomas Dossett, T.B. Mitchell, Pembroke Mitchell, James Q. Sones, E.R. Boone, B.S. Penton and A. Jack Spiers.

Old Antioch always cooperated in the work of the Hobolochitto Baptist Association, as did also the churches of this area until about 1897 and 1898, when some began cooperating in the work of the Southern Baptist Convention. This resulted in a division of the Hobolochitto Association in 1902.

Afterward, Antioch, and all the churches which refused to cooperate with the "Convention Board," were referred to as "Landmark Baptist," with apparent reference to an Old Testament passage - Prov. 22:28 - which says: 'Remove not the ancient landmark which your fathers have set.' This, it was said, alluded to the fact that these churches rejected what they considered unscriptural change.

With old Antioch Church, the Baptist were the first to bring the gospel message to Picayune. With the development and progress of the City of Picayune, has come many fine churches. In keeping with the zeal which established Antioch, the Baptist are more in number than all others combined.

While old Antioch lingers only as a memory to so many, the history of Picayune can never be written apart from her influence and ministry.

A. E.