Old Palestine Was First Church

By REV. L.S. WALKER

In an area which now includes Pearl River, Hancock, parts of several adjoining counties, and eastern Washington Parish, La., where there are now hundreds of churches, it is difficult to imagine what it would be like moving to an area this large when there were no churches of any kind.

Well, that's just the way it was before 1842. My grandfather, George W. Walker Sr., was born in 1820 in what is now the Roseland Park area of Picayune. He was 22 years old before there was an organized church in this large section of this country.

OLD PALESTINE, originally called Palestine Baptist Church, west of Nicholson, was the first church organized in the area now known as Pearl River, Hancock and parts of several other adjoining counties in south Mississippi. The church was constitued with seven charter members in 1842, according to The Complete History of Mississippi Baptists, by Leavell and Bailey (1904).

Charter members were Thomas J. Stockstill Sr. and wife; Joshua Stockstill and wife; John Penton and wife; and William H. Varnado. Eld. Calvin Magee, pastor of churches in Pike County, Mississippi and Washington Parish, La., assisted Bro. Varnado in the formal organization of the church, traditionally believed to have been in the home of Bro. and Mrs. Thomas J. Stockstill Sr.

When W.H. Varnado first came to this area from Pike County about 1840, he preached in the home of Thomas Stockstill Sr. and other homes of scattered settlers in the area before it was decided to establish a church.

WILLIAM HENRY Varnado, the first missionary to old Hancock County, and most of the Gulf Coast area, for that matter, was born in South Carolina Marh 5, 1804. He moved to Pike County, with his parents by pack-horses in 1809 when only five years old. At the age of 30 years he made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ as his personal Saviour and Lord, and was baptized into the fellowship of Mt. Olive Baptist Church in Pike County.

He soon afterward felt and made known his calling to preach the gospel, was licensed to preach about 1838 or '39. He was ordained to the full work of the Ministry by Mt. Olive Church on August 8. 1840.

Soon after the organization of Palestine Church, a piece of land, believed to have been given by Thomas J. Stockstill Sr. along the south side of the historic Columbia-to-Gainesville river road, was cleared and a rustic log house of worship was erected by the men of the community.

In 1942 this writer heard some of the older members give a vivid description of the roomy old structure and some of the early customs and activities of the church.
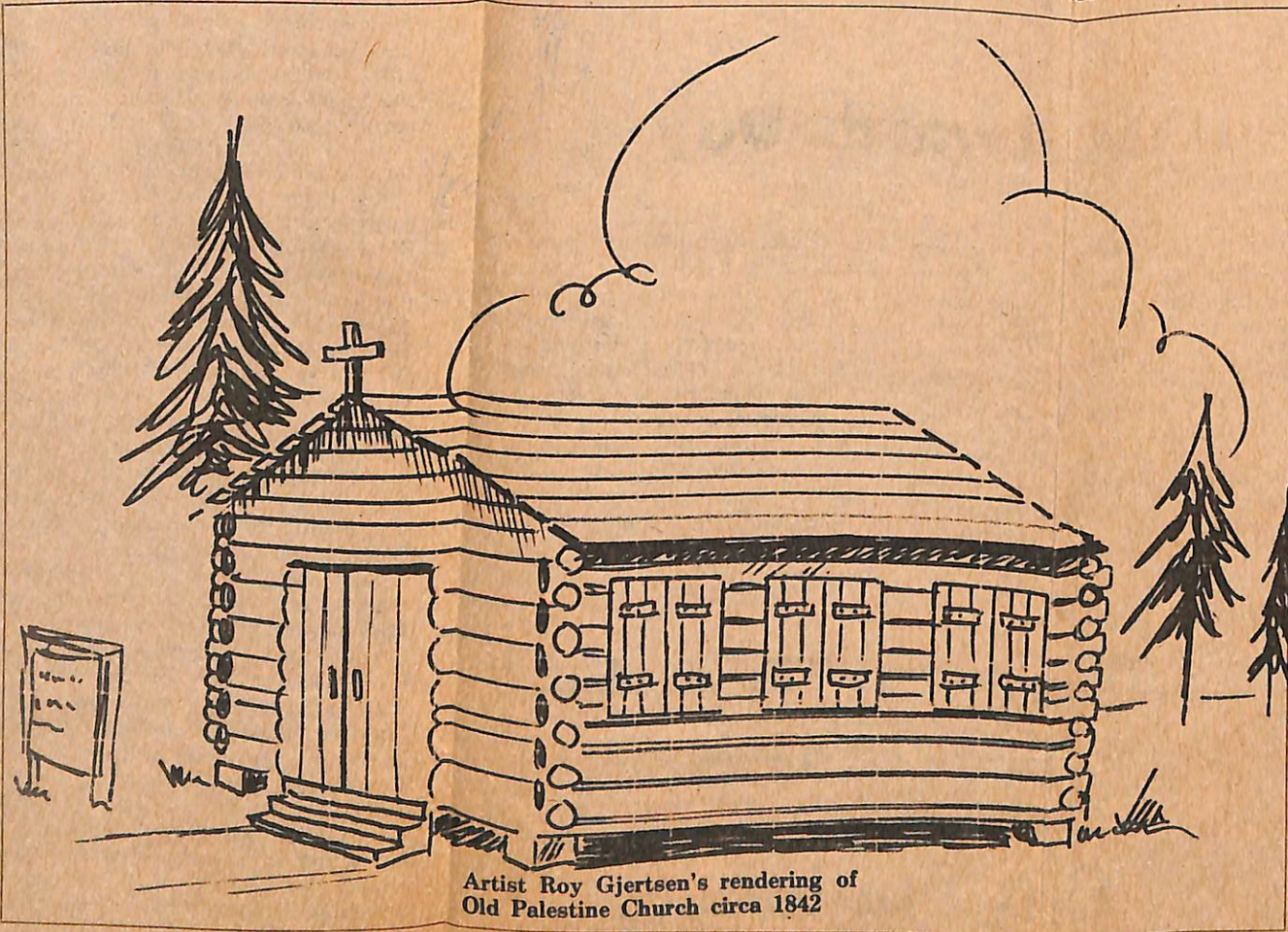
These included Mrs. Sarah Wheat Slaydon, born in 1857, the daught-in-law of Elder Andrew M. Slaydon, a member of Palestine, and the first minister of the gospel ever ordained in this part of the country in 1856; "Uncle" James T. "Fiddlin' Jim" Stockstill, born in 1857; Eld. Walter A. Burks, born in 1859, a former member and pastor of the old church.

MORE RECENTLY their description was confirmed by Mrs. Luther (Ella) Davis grand-daughter of Thomas J. Stockstill Sr.; and Mrs. Letha Slaydon Thigpen, grand-daughter of Eld. A.M. Slaydon, life-long members who could well remember attending services in the large rustic log building which stood about 300 feet south of the Baptist Memorial Marker on the south side of the lower Jackson Landing Road between Nicholson and Walker Hill at Jackson Landing in Pearl River.

It was fondly described as being a rustic structure of modest proportions and starkly simple in its appointments. While, perhaps, being somewhat larger than most such structures of its time, it was somewhat typical of the early meeting houses of the frontier, with no ceiling inside.

"Uncle Jim" Stockstill told of the seating which was of puncheon benches of logs hewn flat and smooth on one side with holes bored into the under side allowing the legs to be firmly inserted.

Artist Roy Gjertsen's rendering of Old Palestine Church circa 1842

POLISH'N

The Pearl.

DAVID A. FARRELL

Be sure and read Rev. L.S. Walker's story in today's JOURNAL about the Old Palestine Baptist Church. It is very interesting. And to add interest to the story, we requested staff artist Mr. Roy Gjertsen to produce a sketch of the old log church from descriptions Rev. Walker had received from old-timers.

The old church, which was founded about 1842, sat on what is today Jackson Landing Road near Nicholson, just north of where the old Palestine Church is now located. I have often wondered how the old structure looked. If we could return to 1842, we would no doubt be surprised how small the structure was, and how rough hewn.

We today sit on cushioned pews in our churches. Our ancestors only a little over 100 years ago sat on half-log pews hewn from virgin pine timber. My! My! How things have changed. And how fast!

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Another interesting note on this subject. While I was attending LSU several years ago, I found in the microfilm room the minutes of the Hobolochitto Baptist Association. As Rev. Walker says in his story today, the association was begun in the mid-1850's, shortly before the Civil War. I read with great interest all these minutes until about 1900.

It is amazing what one finds in these old minutes. About 1868 the association sent out a missionary on horseback. Guess where it sent him? Along the Gulf Coast and into Southeastern Louisiana. He rode on horseback for four months, witnessing, and then returned to make a report to the association. What today we now cover in an automobile in a matter of hours, only a little over 100 years ago took months on horseback.

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The other striking thing about the minutes is to notice the great increase in population and the number of churches in the association after the coming of the railroad through the piney woods in the early 1880s.

Immediately after the railroad came, the timber harvest boom got under way and population began to rise. The coming of the railroad to our area was to Pearl River and