Traditional Ways in Modern Days

Seven miles northwest of Kirksville is the home of Hazel Creek Church. Although the church is almost 100 years old, its impact is still felt by the congregation and the surrounding community.

Hazel Creek Free Will Baptist Church started as Hazel Creek Union Church in January of 1896. It was located on a dirt, later rock, road off the present day Route B. The land for the building and the adjoining cemetery was deeded to the church by William and Mary Link for one dollar.

The original building was finished by December of 1896. It was built mainly by head carpenter Peter Voelker and could hold 160 people. The concrete blocks which formed the foundation of the church were handcast on the creek bank by Mr. and Mrs. Harry Filkins and Mr. and Mrs. Sid Capps. Inside, the building was heated by a coal stove located in the middle of the room and was lighted by kerosene lamps on the walls.

Soon after the church was completed, a Sunday School and the first church body were established. The first Sunday School classes were held on May 2, 1897, and the first offering was $1.86. Each of the classes was held in a different corner of the church building. On October 15, 1897, the official church body was established. The original church body was primarily Free Will Baptists, but Presbyterians and Methodists also attended.

At the beginning of the first services in the original church, the older women would go to the altar to pray before the service. It was customary for the men to sit on the north side of the church, women in the middle, and youth on the south side. This custom continued to the early 1980s. When asked about this seating arrangement, Mrs. Ethel Thompson, a long-time member of the church, said, “Oh, we done it mostly ’til we got in the new church, I think. As a rule, now, visitors, of course, (were) liable to be anywhere.” During the summer, when the church was full, barefoot boys could be seen peeking through the windows and doors.

The Hazel Creek Cemetery was on the land north of the church. Later, the cemetery was expanded to include the area

By Tonja Green and Bryan Thompson

The original Union Church was built in 1897 and was used for 83 years.
beside the church. While the church was still being built, a man named Samuel Scott said he would be the first one buried in the cemetery. On August 14, 1896, his prediction came true.

The first parsonage, about a mile south of the original church, was the old John Natto place and contained 17 acres. The Wayne Barnhill family lives there now.

The church soon became predominantly Free Will Baptist. Although the church was still called Union, most of the trustees, deacons, and the church body were made up of Free Will Baptists. These Baptists believe that one has the free will to receive or reject God. If a believer chooses to reject God, he or she commits apostasy, and God’s spirit will not strive with him anymore.

In the early years, there were 113 people on the roll, but average attendance was about 57. The roll was larger than the attendance because members’ names were left on the roll until death. Even those who moved were still kept on the roll. One part way, the children could see under the floor of the upstairs. Some members built a plasterboard wall to keep the children’s minds on the lesson rather than the underside of the church. The congregation switched from using a wood stove to coal furnace, which was placed in the new basement. Also, the congregation switched to gas lights instead of kerosene lamps.

For Easter recreation, members held Annual Easter Egg Roasts in Jim Newcomer’s pasture. They gathered for a picnic that included fried or hard-boiled eggs. Baptisms were done in the river, pond, or Hazel Creek. Sometimes the ice had to be broken, and children were often baptized two at a time.

During the mid-1900s, there were more changes and growth. Maizie Sevits started Vacation Bible School in 1946. During the summer, youth came to the church each day for a week, had refreshments, played games, made crafts, sang, and learned from the Bible. Hazel Creek has had a Vacation Bible School practically every year since then.

Under the ministry of the Rev. Rolla Smith, 1949-52, the congregation started meeting every Sunday instead of every other Sunday. The Rev. Wayne Parsons, who ministered from 1952 to 1954, made the church even more active. The foot washing ceremony was introduced in 1952. Members participate

One of the most popular annual events was the church picnic, held at the river. Members caught fish and then fried them in pans on the banks.

In 1965, Maizie Sevits recruited the youth to paint the fence around the Hazel Creek Union Church. Later, this fence was torn down and a metal fence was put in its place.

Before obtaining a baptismry in the new church, many people were baptized in the icy waters of Hazel Creek.

3
in this ordinance by taking turns washing each other’s feet in basins of water and drying with long towels, much like the way it was done during the time of Christ. The men are in one room and the women are in the other. They say it is a humbling experience and quite a blessing. Communion is also taken with this ordinance. Back in the mid-1900s, they used only one glass. Mrs. William Newcomer purchased a set of glasses for the church. That communion set has been added to, but is still used today.

In 1950, a new parsonage was purchased from Hershel Sevits. This parsonage had eight acres of land and was less than a mile south of the old church.

In earlier years, the women’s group was called Ladies Aide. They wore white uniforms, went to shut-in’s homes to help them, and held services at the nursing homes. To raise money, the women sold eggs or chickens or sold lunches at farm sales. Their group name changed to Ladies Missions during the 1950s.

In 1968, the members bought a 60-foot custom-built trailer. It had three built-in classrooms and one large room that could be divided into three more with folding curtains. After the congregation moved to a new church, the trailer was sold.

The present-day Union Church building was deeded to the Hazel Creek Cemetery Board. They hold a meeting there once a year. The building and the land are maintained with perpetual funds from those who have relatives buried in the cemetery.

Mrs. Maizie Sevits believes that “Hazel Creek has to be a force for good, because a community without a church is pretty lawless, and just the fact that there is a church there may keep people from doing wrong.” Many people who have been saved at the church have gone to the far corners of the world: Laverne and Lorene Miley (Ivory Coast), Howard and Joann Filkins (Ivory Coast), and Olena McLain (Japan).

Today’s generation of Hazel Creek members are enjoying a new building, the Hazel Creek Free Will Baptist Church. In October, 1981, the church was built on land donated by Ted Sevits in exchange for the land of the old parsonage. The church is eight miles northwest of Kirkville on the blacktop road of Route B, only one mile from the original Union Church. Many members volunteered work on the new building, with Gary Ledford as general contractor. The church was completed in September of 1982. The total cost of between $80,000 and $100,000 was paid within two years. The first service was held the evening of September 12, and today average attendance is 80 to 90 people. The dedication service was held October 30, 1983, and was a very special day for all of the members. Betty Chrisman is thankful that the church is still carrying on. “We came to Hazel Creek community to find a home; I was a young girl. We came here to put down roots and we found it to be a caring community. The church has been a big part of our lives. It has been a rock and steady influence on our family and a very good place to raise our children.”

Still more changes and growth have occurred throughout the years. The women’s group is now officially called Ladies’ Auxiliary. With the new building came a baptistry, but some choose to be baptized in Hazel Creek in warm weather. Often the members have what is called a “suspension” on a Sunday night. The whole service is spent doing specials and the Rev. Don Robertson encourages skits or anything one feels led
to do for the Lord. During Christmas, the youth put on a program and then there is a gift exchange among everyone. "I guess what the church means to me is a place where you can come and get away from all the world things. It's full of people that would do anything for you and help you out," is the feeling of one youth member, Joel Crossgrove.

The third and present parsonage is about a mile northwest of the church. The parsonage consists of five acres purchased in 1986.

Downstairs, in one of the classrooms called "Memory Lane," hang the framed minutes from the first meeting in 1897, and there are remnants from the old Union Church that members are very proud to continue using today. Some of the original seats and the Bible stand made by Peter Voelker fulfill their purpose just as they did in 1897.

Relatives of the original charter members who still attend are the Filkins, Sevits, and Newcomers. John Filkins says, "I was born in this community. I grew up in the church. I was saved when I was 8 years old in a Sunday School Class. This is just my home." Hazel Creek would make a good church home for anyone, because one always feels welcome.

When leaving the sanctuary of the Hazel Creek Free Will Baptist Church, one object catches the attention of most: the word LOVE in large wooden letters built by Boyd Filkins. Throughout the history of Hazel Creek, that has been the main goal of these people.

"Hazel Creek Church means to me that my roots are here. It goes back long before I was here. My family was instrumental in the building of the Hazel Creek Church and I think when I look at the past, I see that I have a responsibility, being here now at the present, to carry on this work into the future. I think that the church means a place of carrying on God's plan into the future."

Terry Sevits

The new church was built in 1981 to accommodate the growing membership.