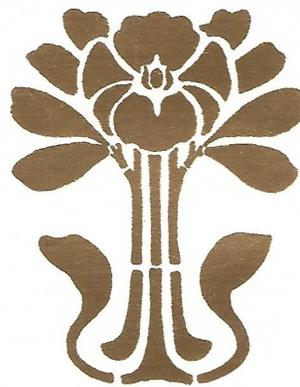


# March We Onward



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A Centennial History of the  
First Baptist Church of  
Walnut Ridge, Arkansas

1889 - 1989

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In 1922 Kirkpatrick submitted his resignation to the First Church. With reluctance, even a note of despair, the church said farewell to a much loved pastor and family. His impact upon the church had been profound, his leadership would be missed. But he left behind a growing church with a solid core of mature leaders fully capable of sustaining the fellowship. In the dark days ahead such leadership would prove crucial to the life and ministry of the church. Like other churches in the South, the Walnut Ridge congregation would face the ravages of a severely deteriorating regional economy during the late 1920s. What is more, the Walnut Ridge congregation would be forced to cope with the closing of the Missouri Pacific Railroad yard - a blow which crippled the local economy in 1927. A tornado ravaged the community in the same year. In 1929 the stock market collapsed and the nation descended rapidly from recession to economic ruin. These devastating events would impact drastically the lives of most members of the Walnut Ridge church. Throughout the trauma of the 1920s and 1930s the church emerged as a cherished haven for those needing encouragement and reassurance. The church remained a vital force when so much that had been trusted and cherished gave way.

The onset of the difficult days of the late Twenties was preceded by a remarkable event during the summer of 1925. On a stifling day late in June the church gathered to launch an "outdoor" revival meeting. A special "tabernacle" had been erected just behind the sanctuary. The wooden structure, constructed by the men and boys of the church, was crude, but sufficient to shield daytime meetings from the searing sun. The greatest virtues of the tabernacle were its size and openness — it could accommodate a larger crowd than the sanctuary and the crowd could enjoy whatever breeze might stir the muggy summer air. Church and community had anticipated the revival meeting for weeks.

Revivals were a part of the Southern religious tradition; they were anticipated eagerly by believers and non-believers alike. There were few special events in most small Southern towns, consequently revivals, — "protracted meetings" — drew many who were simply curious or bored. Of course, many of the casual participants often found spiritual renewal or salvation in the meetings. The most serious and devoted of the Walnut Ridge fellowship had been praying for a special time of renewal as they looked toward their summer revival. The evangelist, Arden Blaylock, was widely known as an effective preacher. None of those who prayed for a special outpouring of God's grace were disappointed.

Hundreds came nightly to jam the tabernacle. Paper fans waved cooling hot faces. Men removed jackets, starched white shirts seemed to refract the unshaded light bulbs strung along the white pine ceiling. Blaylock offered simple appeals to faith and repentance. The crowds grew. On July 11, at the noon hour, Blaylock preached on the courthouse steps. A week passed, then two, and a third, and the crowds continued to grow. Dozens were coming forward each night to rededicate themselves to God or to profess publicly their faith. Men and women knelt at the front benches in repentant prayer or to ask God to touch the heart of an unconverted loved one. No meeting had so engaged the church or community. In the space of a week, forty-nine men, women, and youths were baptized in Clear Lake. Many more who were converted affiliated with other area churches. Probably several hundred recommitted themselves to Christ. Certainly the prayers of many devout Christians had prepared the way for Blaylock. The time too was right for a great revival. There was something in the hot summer air; something that seemed vaguely foreboding and which prompted people to reconsider their faith. Significantly, as the Blaylock meeting progressed, the men and women of Walnut Ridge followed the events occurring simultaneously in Dayton, Tennessee. The front page of newspapers, every radio news broadcast, magazines all kept the community apprised of the "Monkey Trial". The whole world seemed to be watching as the story unfolded in the little Tennessee town where a high school science teacher was on trial for teaching Darwin's theory of evolution. For many, the Scopes' trial was nothing less

than struggle between faith and atheism. Everywhere that June and July of 1925, men and women talked of the Bible and evolution. In such an emotionally charged atmosphere the Blaylock revival took on additional significance in the minds of many in the community. The revival seemed the proper place to reaffirm a commitment to the faith which appeared to be under assault in Dayton. And beyond the tension produced by the Scopes' trial, there was the continuing — unsettling — erratic performance of the regional economy. Cotton prices rocked back and forth. Under such circumstances, church and faith offered a sense of stability and certainty.

In the weeks and months following the Blaylock meeting the church experienced a wave of euphoria. The church laid plans for an ambitious building program comprising a new educational building and new parsonage. Both projects were long overdue. The twenty-five year old parsonage remained in a state of constant disrepair and Sunday school classrooms were cramped and uncomfortable. The church voted, with some reluctance, to borrow if necessary. The regional economy continued to falter. It was suggested finally that the tabernacle be dismantled and materials from that structure be used to construct a temporary Sunday school facility. The tabernacle benches were sold to a Pentecostal congregation to add more money to the building fund. Within a few months the Sunday school building was completed. The church's boys, who used the building most, referred to the wooden structure as "the hut". The name described the building. But it served well enough and many boys learned the doctrines of the faith within the nondescript walls of "the hut". Over the next two or three years improvements were made in "the hut" as the materials from the old pastorium were salvaged or sold.

The new pastorium, authorized in 1925, was not completed for several years. The Sunday school building received first priority and the events of 1927 stunned the congregation causing further delay in the building program. For thirty years the Missouri Pacific Railroad Company, formerly the Iron Mountain, had been the community's single largest employer. Its repair shops and roundhouse in Hoxie provided hundreds of jobs. The railroad workers in turn spent their money in the community. Store owners depended heavily upon the railroad payroll to sustain their businesses. In 1927 the executives of the Missouri Pacific closed the shops and roundhouse in Hoxie, transferring those operations to Poplar Bluff, Missouri. The loss of such a large, well-established employer dislocated the local economy. In the same year a tornado devastated much of Hoxie creating more distress and economic hardship. These events temporarily delayed the church's building program. They did not force the church to withdraw from other commitments. The congregation continued to support cooperative missionary endeavors. This was no small accomplishment. Indeed, many Arkansas churches were abandoning cooperative giving during the late 1920s as the regional economy sagged. By 1926 only 162 of the state's nearly 700 Baptist churches were contributing to cooperative missions. The Walnut Ridge congregation would be forced to diminish significantly its giving during the cataclysm of the 1930s, but it would continue to give.

The church's determined missionary vision was encouraged during the late 1920s by W. E. Fuson whose pastorate began in 1926. Fuson emphasized missions. Under his leadership the church adopted fully the Cooperative Program plan launched by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1922. So enthusiastic was the church's response that in 1927 members contributed 1700 dollars to the program — one fourth of the church's entire budget. The Walnut Ridge congregation had always been willing to work with other Baptists in missions giving — the church had supported cooperative efforts in state missions and had given generously to the Southern Baptist Convention's "75 Million Campaign". But 1927 and 1928 marked new, higher levels of the church's commitment to cooperative missions. Fuson's dynamic leadership — he was an energetic preacher — surely inspired the church in giving.

And under Fuson's leadership the church grew steadily in membership despite the losses of 1927 and 1928 as employees of the Missouri Pacific Railroad moved to Poplar Bluff. Fuson led several highly successful revival meetings during his tenure as pastor. In the 1928 meeting the church gained thirty-two members and for the first time the total membership exceeded 400. The Sunday school program grew as well. In 1929 the church reported over 370 Sunday school members. G. E. Henry ably superintended the church's expansive Bible teaching ministry. The Henry family had long served the church in various capacities and represented one of the most consistent sources of leadership throughout the church's first half century.



*This photograph was made on Easter Sunday, 1928. The pastor, W. E. Fuson, may be seen on the extreme right. He is wearing a frock coat, his traditional pulpit attire.*

Encouraged by the steady growth of the church the deacons recommended that the fellowship proceed with the construction of a new parsonage. The cost was estimated at 3500. The deacons further recommended that the church borrow if necessary. The decision to borrow and build seemed reasonable — even in the face of an uncertain economic environment — given the church's growth during the late Twenties and Fuson's popularity. But it was a decision which ultimately brought a full measure of despair and discord. The collapse of the national economy in 1929 strained the church's financial resources beyond the breaking point and made repayment of the church's indebtedness an onerous burden.

Ironically, Fuson was never to live in the new parsonage which was completed shortly after his departure in 1930. Fuson's call to the First Baptist Church in Poplar Bluff, Missouri surprised no one. Numerous members of the Walnut Ridge congregation had moved to Poplar Bluff after 1927. When the First Baptist Church there began looking for a pastor in 1930 the recently arrived immigrants from Walnut Ridge recommended their former pastor. Fuson accepted the call to Poplar Bluff despite the pleading of many in the Walnut Ridge congregation. In a special business meeting the church implored Fuson to reconsider, but his decision was final.

Fuson's departure coincided with the full onset of the Great Depression. Across the nation businesses and banks closed, millions of jobs were lost, wages fell. The Walnut Ridge community was

not exempted from the catastrophe. Most members of the First Church would know the pain of economic deprivation. More than a few would see savings and salaries vanish overnight. A time of testing had arrived for the church. The test proved a severe one.



*Some of the destruction caused by the tornado of 1927.*