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In Cleveland County's Early Days

By MAMIE JONES

July 9-1953

The Rev Thomas Dixon, one of the outstanding pioneer Baptist preachers and church builders of the latter half of the 19th Century in this county, preached a funeral sermon 99 years ago, about this time of year, which ultimately resulted in the founding of New Prospect Baptist church, located near Buffalo creek, on what was then the highway leading from Shelby to Lincolnton, eight miles above Shelby.

The handsome brick church, one of the outstanding country churches of the county, has been remodelled and is out of debt. It is therefore meet and fitting that a grandson of Elder Dixon, namely, the Honorable Frank Murray Dixon, former governor of Alabama, should participate in the dedication ceremonies which will be held there on Sunday, August 2nd.

In earlier days, the western portion of Lincoln county, which later became the eastern portion of Cleveland county, was settled by German immigrants (Pennsylvania Dutch) who were of the Lutheran faith. In 1801, Teeter Beam, a devout Lutheran, set aside a plot of land on a hill thickly wooded with oak and hickory, to be used as a burying-ground for the entire community, regardless of denomination. He built a small church of logs to be used for funerals, and for religious services for the Lutherans.

In the midsummer of 1853, a prominent Baptist citizen of the community died, and it was evident the little log church would not accommodate the crowd that would attend the services. So a brush arbor was erected and handhewn slabs were used for seats.

A ZEALOUS REVIVALIST

Elder Thomas Dixon conducted the funeral; and since he was an outstanding orator and a young man of magnetic personality, the audience was greatly moved by his words. Sensing the impression



THE REV. THOMAS DIXON, father of the five famous Dixons, the County's most illustrious family.

he had made, he announced at the close of the funeral service that the next day he would begin a "protracted meeting" there. These services continued daily with large attendance for two weeks, and, since he was a zealous revivalist, there were 40 conversions.

The next year, through the efforts of Elder Dixon, Elder Wade Hill, and Elder Joseph Suttle, New Prospect Baptist church was "constituted October 6th, 1854, numbering 85 members." Elder Thomas Dixon was chosen pastor and continued to serve for 55 years. Messrs. J. L. Ledford, Andrew Beam, V. H. Elliott, and J. F. Wilson were elected deacons,

and J. C. Hoyle was appointed church clerk. Presumably some sort of arrangement was made with the Lutherans whose church it appears they took over.

BAPTISTS PREDOMINATE

The Rev. Harlan Harris tells me that according to a survey, there are 62 Baptist churches within the county, with more than 21,000 members. This predominance of the Baptist denomination, is due in part to the labors and leadership of Elder "Tommy" Dixon who, during the 65 years of his ministry, from 1844 to 1909, served 32 churches, more than half of which he aided in founding. He was the first moderator of the Kings Mountain Baptist Association in 1851. He is said to have baptized 6,000 converts.

He believed that "He who winneth souls is wise," hence his preaching was evangelical and is described as being "exhortatory in character and manifests much pathos."

His son, Amzi Clarence Dixon, who ranked among the great Baptist preachers of the world 40 years ago, attended one of his father's revival meetings, and later remarked: "Father's revival preaching is indescribable, swaying the multitude with a power I have never seen equalled. I saw strong men, noted for their wickedness, fall from their seats and cry aloud for mercy. After the sermon, Father would move among the audience speaking or praying with them, his face radiant with joy."

A WORD PAINTER

Rev. John W. Suttle says that Elder Dixon had a dozen sermons—or maybe two dozen—which he preached over and over. As a rule, he held preaching service only once a month in each church, and he could easily get by with this. Mr. Suttle recalls especially a sermon on "The Children of Israel Crossing the Red Sea." He says: "Elder Dixon's description

CLEVELANDER

(Starts on Second Front)

was so vivid, so realistic, one was lost in listening. You could hear the glad shouts of the on-rushing Israelites, and the screams of the thwarted Egyptians. Actually, one could hear chariot wheels creaking."

The Reverend Suttle recalls an occasion when Elder Dixon was to deliver the ordination charge to a young preacher. However, the two speakers who preceded him had, together, talked for nearly two hours and the audience was restless. Elder Dixon, who seldom preached more than 20 minutes, knew the value of brevity. He addressed the young preacher: "My brother, preach the Word, the whole Word, and nothing but the Word," and sat down. When Elder Dixon was asked about permitting playing the fiddle in the church, he replied: "It makes sweet music. But the fiddle has been in bad company. Leave it out of the Church."

CHARGED WITH HERESY

His famous son, Thomas Dixon, Junior, author of "The Clansman," "The Birth of a Nation," and other novels and plays, says that one of the most humiliating experiences his father ever had was when he was tried for heresy about 1854. "The heresy consisted in his having invited a Methodist preacher into his pulpit to assist him in one of his services. An old deacon in the Baptist church in Shelby was an intense old-timer and did not like the Methodists at all. He called a council (after my father had this minister in the pulpit with him); and of course Father attended the trial. The deacon who gave the use of the church did not know what it was being used for. When the old deacon Hoyle found out they were going to try my father for heresy, he nailed every window and padlocked the door, and then went to meet my father and apologized to him; and told him he had been called as pastor of New Prospect church."

During Elder Dixon's early ministry the theatre was considered very wicked, and he never overcame his aversion for it. When "The Clansman" was being presented on the stage at Charlotte, Thomas, Junior, sent his father complimentary tickets for the show. His father replied promptly: "Dear Son, I have your letter and tickets for which I thank you. But I have lived all these years without ever going inside a theatre. And by the help of the Lord, I shall not go in now. Nevertheless, I wish you good success."

A HORSE TRADER

His daughter, Dr. Delia Dixon Carroll, for many years physician at Meredith college, wrote: "Father loved a trade better than any other form of amusement. He would swap a jack-knife, a mule, a horse, a farm, or a house, at the wink of an eye. When he left home in his buggy with a pretty bay mare, he was liable to return next day driving a skinny grey mule, so poor it could hardly stand; and the next day come home with a black prancing colt that had never been driven before."

Thomas Dixon, senior, was born in South Carolina in 1820, right near where the Battle of Kings Mountain was fought in 1780. It was in this battle that his grandfather Col. Frederick Hambright, one of the seven Colonels commanding the American forces, proved himself a leader.

Thomas' mother, Mrs. Suannah Hambright Dixon, was the 22nd child of Col. Hambright. At the age of 104 she—as the sole surviving child of the War of the Revolution in South Carolina—was one of the distinguished guests at the centennial celebration held Oct. 7, 1880, at the Kings Mountain battleground, and shared honors on the platform with the speaker, Hon., John Daniel.

At an early age, Dixon showed outstanding aptitude for preaching, and since he had not the money to get an education, some of the Baptists in the neighborhood of Antioch church provided a little money for his schooling. In 1844 he was ordained.

According to such records as I can find, Thomas Dixon and Amanda McAfee were married in 1848. It would appear that Amanda was very young. Her tombstone at New Prospect church cemetery says she was born in 1835. He and his young bride lived in a white house on the corner of W. Warren and S. LaFayette street where Penney's department store now stands. Here he operated a small store for a number of years.

MOVED TO ARKANSAS

About March, 1861, he and his family and 32 Negro slaves, which had been a part of his wife's dower, left Shelby and migrated to the Territory of Arkansas. They stayed there more than three years. When he returned to this county in the Fall of 1863, Elder Dixon had only \$100 in gold.

I recall that one day sometime during 1900, Mr. Dixon came to see my father on business. I recall him as a tall 80-year-old man with white hair, and of commanding appearance. He told my father he had borrowed money to send all his children to school.

LOVED AND REVERED

A woman who was a member of one of Elder Dixon's churches in the late 1890's told me: "We children loved to see him come into our home. We felt his presence was a benediction. He loved people; and because of his kindness and charm people loved him."

"Church services in the country prior to 1900 were not formal," my informant continued. "Serv-

ices would begin when the congregation had assembled, rather than at a specified hour. Preacher Dixon would drive up in his buggy on Sunday morning — or maybe Sunday afternoon — would hitch his horse, and come immediately into the church through the front door. When he entered the church he would begin singing and continued as he proceeded up the aisle. The assembled congregation would take up whatever hymn he was singing, and by the time he reached the pulpit the song was going in full force.”

Frank Dixon, father of Maj. Frank Murray Dixon, above referred to, was a Baptist minister, but gave up the pulpit, and became a Chautauqua lecturer.

With the exception of Mrs. Addie May Dixon Thacker, all the five famous Dixons, who constitute Cleveland County's most illustrious family, are dead. Mrs. Thacker is a lecturer and writer of novels and religious articles. She is now at work on a biography of her father.

Thomas Dixon, senior, lived to be ninety years old. He died in

1909, and is buried in the cemetery at New Prospect church. (Copyright by Mamie Jones, 19

Prisoner Kept Going

LAURINBURG, N. C. (P)—Robert Morrison, 43, a Negro, escaped Monday from Prison Camp near Wagram. Superintendent D. Thames said Morrison, a co went to a field for vegetables, down his basket and kept going.

He was sentenced in Lee Court in 1948 to 20 years for manslaughter.