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Our Pretty Little Church

Baker Presbyterian is city's oldest sanctuary still in use

By CAROL ANNE BLITZER

BAKER — Take La. 19 through Baker and you'll see an assortment of commercial and residential buildings, most dating from the last quarter of the 20th century. But tucked in a quiet area on Green Road just over the railroad track is one building that stands out because it is so different from the others. It's the Baker Presbyterian Church, and what makes the little white frame church so unique is that it's old, almost 100 years old.

"We are proud that this building is the only Baker still standing and in use," the Rev. Ted Roeling wrote in April. Roeling, who has served as minister of the church since 1978, is recovering from recent surgery.

Eighty-four-year-old Mansel Slaughter knows the building well. "It was a baby," he said. "When I was growing up in the church, the congregation was very small. "We didn't have enough people for Sunday school," he said. "I went to the Methodist Church for Sunday school, then went to the Baptist Church to BYPU (an organization for young people)."

Slaughter remembers afternoon services in the church before the days of air conditioning. "There were no screens on the windows," he said. "You just raised up the windows to let the air come in."

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ABOVE: Billie Jean Odum and Pike Hay, left to right, front, and Pearl and Marie Crowther, back, have deep roots in the church.

LEFT: The pulpits and altar furniture are original to the building. The choir section was added later when Mansel Slaughter donated seats from his old Trio Theater in Zachary.
Church
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Patterson served at the church until he retired in December 1962. In 1903, the Rev. D.F. Wilkinson took the position. He, too, preached at the Plains Presbyterian Church on Sunday mornings and at War in the afternoon.

For many years, members of the small congregation began making glass and raising money for a church building. Construction began on Jan. 11, 1915, in land donated by Kate Louise Bradley Young.

"The church had a Vocalion, a type of pump organ, which Slaughter recalls often had to be played by two people. "You would pump while the other played the keys," he said.

Wilkinson wrote in his pastor's report for 1915, "During the year we built our pretty little church. It cost $2,500."

"The church was built like a theater," said longtime member Rose Hays. "The pews curve. The floor slants to the front. Each pew is different."

The ceiling was built for acoustics," Hays said. "The church has music for our services."

Wilkinson retired in 1919 when he became full-time minister at the Plains church. For the next 21 years, the congregation had a series of ministers and elders who conducted services. During that time, we mostly had elders from other Presbyterian churches," said Paul Slaughter. "Manuel Slaughter's wife, who in 1972 became the church's first woman deacon.

One minister, the Rev. E.E. Davis of the Monte Sano Church, held services on the first and third Sundays at the church's history was done by her sister. Much of the research on the church's history was done by her great-grandfather, A.S. Foote, longtime church member. Her great-uncle, Harris McVea, was the pastor of the church 49 years ago. "But we would never do away with this church."

"We almost built a brand new church," said Hays. "We were married in the church 49 years ago. "But we would never do away with this building. Even if we built another structure, we would maintain it as a closed structure.

"Through the efforts of Billman and Dorothy Slaughter Foote, the original church building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in March 1990. This has probably saved three large live oak trees at the front of the church, right in the path of a project to widen Groom Road.

Roeling said that local preservationists "recognized the uniqueness of the structure and took steps to build the building and the original grounds, including the historic live oak trees, placed on the National Register."

"Because the trees are listed on the National Register," Barbara Foote said, "they can't be touched."

"We had 100 people at the dedication," Roeling said. "That included the furnishings," said Sister Odom. "They cannot be touched."

Roeling said that the church was heated by a wood stove located to the left of the church. Hays remembers that crosses in the church were once pressed tin is now painted white. Slaughter Foote, Mansel Slaughter's sister. Hays said, "That included the furnishings," said Sister Odom. "They cannot be touched."

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The sanctuary still contains its 13 original stained-glass windows. The ceiling's border design were once pressed tin is now painted white. Slaughter Foote, Mansel Slaughter's sister. Hays said, "That included the furnishings," said Sister Odom. "They cannot be touched."

When McGehee and his wife, Billie Jean McGehee, reached the church, they had lived there for several years. "One would pump while the other played the keys," he said.

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