La. Primitive Baptists Bear Appellation of 'Hardshell'

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The term "Hardshell" Baptists has been around a long time, usually applied to very strict churches. However, the real "Hardshells" Baptists are more properly known either as the Primitive Baptists or the Old School Baptists, and they are located in Louisiana.

One of these churches is the Enon Primitive Baptist Church, located about five miles east of Pickering in the western portion of Vernon Parish. Enon Church, which also has been known by the names of the communities it has been located in (Hunt's Springs and Elmwood), was established by five Baptists in (then) Rapides Parish on Nov. 1, 1832, making Enon one of the oldest, if not the oldest, of the Primitive Baptist Churches in the state. (A Vernon Parish was part of Rapides Parish until 1861 when it was constituted as a separate county.)

The five charter members of Enon Church were Henry Cooper, Elisabeth Cooper, Daniel Cryer, Harrison Singley and J.D. Cain. The Cooper family was prominent in that area as a small community known as Cooper, and Cooper Baptist Church, are not far away from Enon's present location.

With the exception of Holy Grove Methodist Church, the church building now used by the congregation was erected in 1852. The church building is one of the oldest of the Primitive Baptist congregations in the state.

The Enon Church has a membership of 62 and its pastor is Elder Herman J. Blackmon, a black man, living near Lewisville.

Primitive Baptists have the reputation of being the strictest orthodox and most "exclusive" of all groups. As a matter of fact, they have never been organized into a formal denomination and have no central headquarters, each church being an autonomous body. However, several congregations in many areas will join together in "associations" for fellowship and joint worship, but only other churches in "good order" and members likewise in "good order" may participate. It is not unusual for annual meetings, such as one held last August at Enon Church, to have no regular members present.

Another unique Primitive Baptist custom is the terminology of its clergymen. Ministers are ordained by "calling," with no seminary training or education required. But all of the clergymen are "Elders." They have no Reverend's, and when the word "reverend" is used in the Bible, it refers directly to God (Psalms 110:7). He sent redemption unto his people: he hath anointed him with the oil of gladness and hath exalted him with his name.

Enon Church has services twice each month, and Elder Blackmon serves the church with his wife, Missionary Betty Blackmon. The Primitive Baptists have no musical instruments and are basically anti-missionary in that they do not believe in missionary societies. They do, however, go along with contributions from individuals on a voluntary basis for settling up new churches. They are not proselytizers, and do not go out to win souls. One must come to the church. Although there are no musical instruments, the Primitive Baptist Church, much like the Church of Christ, do have hymn-singing, but this is strictly a cappella, with no organ.

Strong Calvinism runs through the Primitive Baptists' doctrine. The two biblically authorized and accepted ordinances are baptism and the Lord's Supper, while most Primitive Baptists still practice the ritual of foot-washing.

Since their beginnings in the late 1700s and early 1800s, Primitive Baptists have been known as a "Primitive," "Old School," "Regula," "Anabaptist," and "Hard Shell" Baptists, with Primitive Baptists as the most widely accepted and used name. They, like other Baptists in North America, had their start in the New England area, but unlike some other Baptist bodies they left the Baptist mainstream, or vice versa, and in protesting the "money-based" missions and benevolent societies, Sunday schools (they have none) and assessments, they followed the lead of the Kentucky Baptist Association in North Carolina, which had only six years after the Baptist Triennial Convention in 1827, and became independent congregations and associations. For the next several decades, these congregations "found" each other and the Primitive Baptists were born as a separate Baptist entity as more and more churches joined in the exodus from the main body.

Because of the isolation in rural areas, lack of communication and the, in the first place, breakaway by "orthodox" Baptists, is known to be one of the first, if not the first, Primitive Baptist congregations in what is now Louisiana.

For the same reason that the oldest congregation cannot be determined, neither can the number of "good ordination" Primitive Baptists be determined accurately.