

## Chapter XII

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FIRST  
BAPTIST CHURCH OF PORT NECHES

It is no more possible to date the arrival of the first minister of the Baptist faith in Port Neches than it's possible to date the arrival of any other church there. During the pre-Civil War era, the town's residents numbered a sprinkling of German-speaking immigrants, intermixed with an equal number of native-born families, about whose religious faiths very little is known. The defeat of the Confederacy worsened whatever religious life may have existed in the river settlement. Some native families deserted Grigsby's Bluff as a result, and the immigrant families (who probably had been mostly Lutheran in their native Prussia) seemed to have been engrossed with sheer survival on an otherwise harsh frontier. Perhaps the state of post-bellum religious life to some degree can be estimated by the condition of education in the river community. In 1870, only one Port Neches child was enrolled in school, followed by only four in 1880, whereas many Grigsby's Bluff children of school age could neither read nor write, nor were they enrolled in school.

Surviving sources, however, provide some knowledge as to the state of Baptist progress in neighboring towns, and it would have to have been from either Beaumont or Sabine Pass that the first Baptist evangelist to preach on the banks of the Neches River at Port Neches must originate. In the Social Statistics Census, Schedule VI, of 1860, Beaumont was credited with having both Baptist and Methodist "societies," who shared community services in the court house.<sup>1</sup> Because no local or association minutes of that era survive, the First Baptist Church of Beaumont dates its origin from about 1865 (although undoubtedly it is at least 20 years older). As of 1877, Baptist and Methodist congregations there shared ownership of Beaumont's only church building, and in 1885, the Methodists raised funds to buy out the interests of the Baptists in that earliest community church.<sup>2</sup>

Earliest evidences of a Baptist congregation at Sabine Pass are equally sketchy. In 1861, deacons of the Tremont Baptist Church pur-

<sup>1</sup>Eighth Census of the U. S., 1860, Jefferson County, Tx., Sch. VI, Social Statistics.

<sup>2</sup>W. R. Estep, Centennial History of The First Baptist Church of Beaumont (Fort Worth: 1972); W. Ward and R. Crenshaw, Cornerstones: A History of Beaumont and Methodism (Dallas: 1968), pp. 25-32.

chased \$300 worth of sundry items from the R. F. Green Grocery at Sabine Pass, and the Negro Baptist congregation of that seaport dates its origin from 1863. In 1870, Rev. S. G. McClenny was Sabine's Baptist pastor at the only Baptist church structure then in Jefferson County.<sup>3</sup> This building and congregation were destroyed by the disastrous hurricane of Oct. 12, 1886, but were eventually reorganized and rebuilt by the Rev. George H. Stovall.<sup>4</sup> Although unidentified by name, the Baptists were certainly one of the "two Christian denominations" reported as being active at Sabine Pass in 1858.<sup>5</sup>

The writer concludes that the instrument responsible for bringing the first lasting (as opposed to intermittent) Baptist services to Port Neches was the Rachford families, who migrated from Kentucky to Beaumont in 1884. The families included the parents, Robert E. and Angie Rachford; a grown son, James H.; a grown daughter, Mary; and a teenage daughter, Lola (see photos page 158). The Rachfords quickly became identified with Beaumont's lumber industry and united with the First Baptist Church of that city. In 1888, Mary Rachford married Dandridge A. Bibb, bookkeeper at the Reliance sawmill, followed soon after by J. H. Rachford's marriage to Annie Baughan. In 1890, J. H. Rachford bought the 50-acre Remley tract of land, between Park and Main Streets, at Port Neches, which included the old Moseley plantation house (where Dearing St. intersected the river), thereafter known as "the Rachford place." J. H. Rachford soon moved to Port Neches, where he soon became one of Grigsby's Bluff's earliest school teachers. Dan and Mary Bibb also moved to Port Neches about 1892, and were the only family in the 1900 Port Neches census that the writer can definitely identify as being Baptist. After 1890, the Rachfords owned and utilized residences in both Beaumont and Port Neches, which lends endless confusion to their family history. Hence, the writer's deduction, that Port Neches' first Baptist services were at "the Rachford place," and probably by their Beaumont pastor of 1890, the beloved Rev. J. A. Smart, is unavoidable.

In 1900, less than 20 families resided along two miles of Neches River waterfront at Port Neches. After the building of the asphalt

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<sup>3</sup>Ninth Census of the U. S., 1870, Sabine Pass, Tx., Schedule V, Social Statistics, and Sch. I, Population, res. 27; File 82, Estate of R. F. Green, Probate File, Jefferson County Archives.

<sup>4</sup>J. M. Carroll, Texas Baptist Statistics (Houston: 1895), p. 76.

<sup>5</sup>Galveston Weekly News, Sept. 21, 1858.

plant, the population increased steadily to about 60 families in 1910, and the influx of population brought a small number of new Baptists to the river settlement. In Dec., 1906, they organized the first Baptist Sunday School there in the home of John Smith.<sup>6</sup> In Jan., 1907, the first Baptist revival at Port Neches, of which there is a published record, was conducted by "the Rev. Mr. Waer (probably Ware), Baptist evangelist," at the "Rachford Store."<sup>7</sup> Upon checking with Agnes Nall Park of Beaumont, the only surviving Rachford granddaughter, the writer was advised that "Rachford Store" was probably only a geographic location. Half of the small Rachford store building was built on pilings out over the Neches River, making it a most unlikely site for a revival. Hence, the actual services were probably conducted in the spacious Rachford family parlor or equally commodious Rachford barn and carriage house. Gradually, Baptist services were conducted on alternating Sundays at the community church-school, at Port Neches Ave. and Nall Street (see photo page 197). According to Era Block Henderson, Angie and Robert E. Rachford, until the latter's death in March, 1911,<sup>8</sup> arrived at Sunday morning services in a buggy drawn by an old, white mule.

By Oct. 1, 1910, the Port Neches Baptists obviously felt that their numbers warranted the organization of a congregation. By that year, the Baptist moderator, Rev. W. L. Robertson (listed as Lucius W. in the 1910 census), as did the Methodist circuit rider, lived in Nederland and served two or three churches.<sup>9</sup> Two accounts of that organizational meeting survive, the first as follows:<sup>10</sup>

"At 3:30 P. M. (Oct. 9) at Port Neches, the representatives of the First Baptist Church of Beaumont, the "Peveto" (First) Baptist Church of Nederland, and the Port Arthur Baptist Church will meet together at Port Neches for the purpose of organizing a church at that place. After the organization, Pastor Robertson will baptize some candidates in the Port Neches River at the Magnolia Grove (Fig Tree Landing)."

<sup>6</sup>Beaumont Enterprise, December 9, 1906.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., January 20, 1907.

<sup>8</sup>"Obituary of R. E. Rachford," March 11, 12, 1911.

<sup>9</sup>Thirteenth Census of the U. S., 1910, Jefferson County, Texas, Enum. Dist. 91, res. 20.

<sup>10</sup>Beaumont Enterprise, October 9, 1910.

The following Sunday, a subsequent newspaper article observed:<sup>11</sup>  
 "The First Baptist Church of Port Neches completed its organization last Sunday with fourteen members, two of whom are to be baptized Sunday at 11:00 A. M. The deacons are R. E. Rachford and J. M. Livingston. The church clerk is Mr. Peveto and board member Deacon Rachford. They have secured two lots and will soon be busy erecting a building."

The church's "Diamond Anniversary, 1910-1985" bulletin, dated June 23, 1985, listed only 12 charter members, but added that two baptismal candidates, Mary and Mildred Bibb, were baptized after the organizational meeting at the school house. The twelve charter members were Mr. and Mrs. John Livingston, Horace Livingston, Angie and Robert Rachford, Dan and Mary Rachford Bibb, Arthur K. Peveto, Mr. and Mrs. (Fern) Peveto, Flavia Peveto (Mrs. A. C.) Block, and Mrs. Ollie Williams.<sup>12</sup> Robert Rachford, age 68, died only 6 months after the church organized, but his widow, Angie E. "Grandma" Rachford, lived to advanced years, remaining a familiar sight in "old town" (Rachford Addition) until her death in 1935. Their daughter and son-in-law, Dan and Mary Bibb, were also familiar sights in "old town," where D. A. Bibb was variously merchant, insurance agent, postmaster, and justice of the peace at the intersection of Grigsby and Dearing Street. In 1910, the Bibb family included sons Robert, Ben, William, James, John, Elias, and Joseph, and daughters Mildred and Mary. The surviving family left Port Neches after the death of Mr. Bibb about 1926. Flavia Peveto of Johnson's Bayou, La. (the mother of Era Block Henderson-- see page 78) married A. C. Block of Port Neches in 1901 and resided on the family farm at Port Neches Ave. and Block St. Ollie Williams was the wife of Clint Williams, an asphalt plant employee, and the mother of Maude Williams, subsequently a Baylor graduate and a Port Neches kindergarten teacher. The Livingston and Peveto families were not listed in the Port Neches census of April, 1910, and it was probably their arrival a few weeks later which boosted the Baptist enumeration to the point sufficient to organize.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Beaumont Enterprise, October 16, 1910.

<sup>12</sup> "Diamond Anniversary, 1910-1985" Bulletin, dated June 23, 1985; ~~undated~~ clipping, ca. 1944, in "Record" book, First Baptist Church Archives. The Bibb family name is often misspelled with an 's' on the end; however, in 30 years of archival records, from marriage in 1888 to Port Neches directory of 1918, it appears only as 'BIBB.'

<sup>13</sup> Thirteenth Census of the U. S., 1910, Port Neches, Tx., enum. dist. 91, residences 116, 155, 158, 165.

A newspaper clipping in First Baptist archives, written by Mrs. Ollie Williams in 1944, reveals that: "The church made very little progress for the first two or three years, holding just a few meetings, and meeting along with the Methodists in a Sunday School." Rev. W. L. Robertson, Rev. J. E. Lutewilder, and Rev. W. S. Young were the half-time pastors between 1910 and 1913, each serving two congregations. In 1913, Rev. R. J. Brown, a physically-impaired evangelist from Orange, held a tent revival on vacant property at the intersection of Main and Grigsby, where a number of people were converted and added to the church rolls. Era Block Henderson recalled that, although a child, she was one of those converted and baptized as a result of that meeting. A year later, Rev. Brown and his brother held another tent revival in the park area.<sup>14</sup>

If progress were painfully slow at the beginning, it only coincided with the growth of the town, for substantial population increases did not begin until about 1913. A buggy ride from "old town" to the community church in 1910 was virtually a ride "in the country." "New town" of 1910 had a sprinkling of houses around the church-school at Nall St., but was surrounded for the most part by the farms of C. Albert Smith, Henry Heisler, M. E. Merriman, Abbie and Will Block, and others.

The era before 1910 was a "golden age" of sorts for Southeast Texas' Protestant churches, even if doctrinal lines were blurred, for there were no amusement places, TV, etc., to compete with for the church-goer's time, attention, and financial support. Today, it is hard to visualize that the East Texas churches once supplied personal needs that were far beyond religious refreshment, especially for lonely farm folk, starved for companionship. For the lonely, frontier farm wife, the extents of whose world might well be the rail fence which surrounded her, church attendance might mean cherished feminine associations, news from home or surrounding areas, and a chance to visit and picnic.

Certainly one of the earliest and most welcomed additions to the infant congregation was the arrival of Margaret Herrington, soon to become Mrs. James E. Trussell. Before her marriage, Herrington, a Baylor graduate, was the first principal of the new C. O. Baird School in 1911. She soon married Trussell, general foreman of the Texaco asphalt plant, who earlier had been an "old town" merchant. Many records verify that she was an inspiring leader in every church activity over a span

<sup>14</sup>Undated newspaper clipping, CA 1944; anonymous handwritten MMS, "The First Baptist Church of Port Neches," no date; and handwritten letter, M. Trussell to Rev. L. Webb, Jan. 31, 1946, all of them in First Baptist Church archives.

of 30 years. She and her husband eventually retired and moved to Hankamer, Texas, where she died soon after.

In 1914, the membership began construction of the first church sanctuary, which was completed in 1917 (see page 144). At the beginning the congregation was probably struggling to meet its obligations. A new surge of population, however, would soon triple the town's residents by 1918, about one-half of the new Port Neches citizens being of Acadian French extraction from Louisiana, and the remainder from the pine-covered counties north of Beaumont. On Mar. 24, 1916, Mrs. Angie Rachford conveyed to the congregation two lots at Ave. B and Dearing St. for the sum of \$1, "beginning at a point 300 feet south of the public shell road known as Ave. A (Grigsby) , . . . in consideration that said First Baptist Church of Port Neches will erect and construct upon the lots . . ." The Texas Co. (Texaco) donated \$500 toward the building project. In a letter in the church archives, a former member described how she and Mrs. Trussell were granted permission to solicit contributions inside of the asphalt and roofing plants.<sup>15</sup>

Another archival document, an application to the Home Mission Board for funds to complete the first sanctuary, certainly sheds some light on the early congregation. The application, signed by the board of trustees, Mrs. J. E. Trussell, chairman; A. G. Slaughter, and Mrs. C. F. Williams, requested \$175.00 to complete the building and pay off indebtedness. As of May 20, 1917, the church membership was 45 adults, including 11 adult males, and a Sunday School enrollment of 47. Morning and evening services were conducted each first and third Sunday by Rev. V. V. Youngblood. The application added that the sanctuary would seat 300 persons, and value of the lots and structure was \$2,100. The pastor's salary was \$1,000 annually, of which the membership contributed \$250. Another \$221 each year was devoted to Christian education and missions.<sup>16</sup>

Despite a quite limited membership, auxiliary units of the early church were very active, according to surviving newspaper accounts. The Baptist Young People's Union, under the guidance and tutelage of Mrs. Trussell and Ms. Maude Williams, frequently met and sometimes "motored" to nearby towns to attend meetings. A picture of Mrs. Trussell carrying young people in her touring car in 1917 appears elsewhere in

<sup>15</sup>Vol. 155, p. 507, Deed Records, Jefferson County Archives; also, letter, Mary Bibb Potts to Mrs. Clark, Cains' Store, Ky., May 9, 1961, "Early History," Archives.

<sup>16</sup>"Application For Aid In Completing House of Worship," Trustees to Home Mission Board, May 20, 1917, First Baptist Church Archives.

this volume. At a meeting of the B. Y. P. U. in the Trussell home in June, 1918, "forty members were present."<sup>17</sup>

For Christmas, 1917, "the Ladies' Aid of the First Baptist Church sent a large supply of winter clothing and bedding to Buckner's Orphans Home on Dec. 15, and the ladies will soon have another large box ready to send." Some of the early members who were present at a meeting the following March included Mrs. Trussell, Mrs. Alice Drawhorn, Mrs. Carter, Mrs. W. H. Garrett, Mrs. D. A. Bibb, Mrs. (Angie) Rachford, Mrs. (Tom) Wrinkle, Mrs. (Fermin) Maurin, Mrs. Dee Smith, and Mrs. Travis L. Harris.<sup>18</sup> Later the ladies were engaged in other projects "to help raise money for the additional building fund." During the same year, Messrs. J. W. Baker, F. Maurin, N. Williams, B. Sterling, and W. Drawhorn "~~were elected church deacons~~. The ordaining service will be held June 20."<sup>19</sup> Another account of 1917 observed that the Baptist ladies had reorganized the Aid Society, with the following officers: Mrs. Ed Trussell, pres.; Mrs. J. W. Baker, vice pres.; Mrs. B. T. White, secy.; Mrs. C. F. Remington, treas.; and Mrs. T. L. Harris, organist."<sup>20</sup>

While the writer enjoys injecting a few names within limitations, this becomes virtually impossible after 1920, after which membership reached about 300 persons. As noted the first three pastorates were brief and half-time. That of Rev. V. V. Youngblood was also half-time, but lasted until 1918, to include the building of the first sanctuary. In 1918, Rev. W. H. Fortney became the first full-time minister, and his 14-year pastorate set a church record for longevity. It also witnessed the building of the second, ill-fated structure, and a period of tremendous growth of membership. Photos in the church archives depict Rev. Fortney baptizing new members during his first year in Port Neches.

During the early 1920's, First Baptist Church, like the city of Port Neches at large, enjoyed steady growth potential that would soon outgrow the old quarters and quickly materialize plans for a spacious new building. While the writer has located no membership figures for the 1920's or the seating capacity of the 1927 sanctuary, he would project as his guess a figure of about 500 persons. (Although then Methodist, the writer and his father often attended revival services in the 1927 structure, which seating capacity certainly appeared to exceed 500.) Almost the only surviving document of that period is a 4-page

<sup>17</sup>"Port Neches," Beaumont Enterprise, Aug. 27; Sept. 1, 1917; Mar. 3; Jul. 1, 1918.

<sup>18</sup>"Port Neches," Ibid., June 17, 1917; Mar. 24, 1918.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., June 9, 1918.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., Sept. 23, 1917.

copy of "The Baptist Budget" for March, 1925, published by the congregation. Since that monthly bulletin is denominated "Vol. III, Nr. 1," the original issue must have appeared in March or April, 1923.

While the bulletin quotes no enrollment figures, the writer can read "a great deal between the lines." To begin with, even the bulletin's format tells something of the membership's size and prosperity, for it was commercially printed. To today's churches, accustomed as they are to inexpensive offset printing, that statement reveals nothing, but the 1925 issue was set in hot type on a linotype machine by a commercial printer, a much more expensive process. The bulletin reveals that 115 members had paid their pledges for the previous February. During that same month, 11 new members had been accepted into the church either through baptism or letter. The previous Sunday, 40 Senior B. Y. P. U. members had presented a program at the Baptist mission in Sabine Pass. The church had 48 officers and teachers, and a special offering scheduled for April 25 would benefit 7 Christian endeavors entirely apart from the local congregation. Although the church's telephone number was No. 81, the writer's logical conclusion, from "reading between the lines," is that the membership totalled "well into the hundreds."<sup>21</sup>

As plans for a new sanctuary reached fruition in 1927, the congregation acquired two adjacent lots from Mrs. Rachford on May 27 for \$1,000, of which \$300 was cash in hand, the remainder donated. During the succeeding year, a handsome edifice, that was to become the most beautiful building built in midcounty up until that year, was completed of red brick at a cost of \$33,000. It was a spacious, two-story structure, with its covered front entrance buttressed by four huge, ionic porch columns.<sup>22</sup>

Other documents recorded at the court house in 1928 reveal some of the church's financial obligations of that period. In March, the Board of Trustees passed a resolution, signed by Fermin Maurin as secretary and J. W. Baker as acting elected president, to execute and deliver deeds of trust for lots 26-32, Block 4, to Southern Mortgage Company of New Orleans, notes to mature between Apr., 1929 and Apr., 1932. On May 31, 1928, the instruments were signed by J. W. Baker, Fermin Maurin, W. D. Drawhorn, C. T. Gentry, Edgar White, Chas. O. Stewart, and Mrs. J. E. Trussell as "trustees and deacons of the First Baptist Church of Port Neches . . . a private corporation duly organized and existing under and by virtue of the laws of the State of Texas."<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup>"The Baptist Budget," Vol. III, No. 1, Port Neches, Tx., May, 1925, pp. 1-4.

<sup>22</sup>Vol. 285, p. 433, Deed Records, Jefferson County Archives; Beaumont Journal, Jan. 10, 1940; Beaumont Enterprise, Jan. 12, 1940.

<sup>23</sup>Vol. 305, pp. 406-409, Deed Records, Jefferson County Archives. ☞

At the end of a fourteen-year pastorate, Rev. Fortney resigned in 1932 to accept a call to Hyde Park Baptist Church in Austin. He was soon replaced by Rev. Joe E. Bryant of San Augustine. Bro. Bryant remained in Port Neches for four years, leaving in 1936 in response to a call to become Baptist minister at Gonzales, Texas. Rev. D. A. Youngblood answered a call to the Port Neches church in 1936, remaining until 1942. He eventually returned to Port Neches to live in retirement and died here in 1955.

During the 1930's, the First Baptist Church weathered many crises, not the least of which was the Great Depression itself, which left many members jobless for long periods of time, and possibly even left the church coffers bare at times. In 1935, some of the congregation withdrew from membership and organized Central Baptist Church. It seems a safe assumption that the loss of members and a high jobless rate certainly had its effects on the church's finances in some manner, and may have required some refinancing of the congregation's bonded indebtedness.<sup>24</sup>

In Aug., 1940, after the second sanctuary had burned and available insurance was being used to pay off lien holders, Sam Montgomery, a member of the Board of Trustees, affirmed in a courthouse-recorded document that the firm of Dane and Weil had been "nominated" to represent and service the church's loan. Originally, the indebtedness handled by Dane and Weil had amounted to \$24,000, represented by 27 bonds executed in 1928. On April 1, 1936, the unpaid balance of \$21,000 was refinanced by the same firm. In its place, 42 new bonds of \$500 each, dated April, 1936, were signed and delivered to the lienholder. And in 1940, S. C. Montgomery had all of the 27 original bonds and 42 renewal bonds in his possession at First National Bank, each "stamped and marked paid in full."<sup>25</sup>

Again, no membership figures are available for the mid-1930's, but the loss of members was probably soon replaced by new converts for baptism or Baptist newcomers moving to the city. And obviously, while finances certainly must have languished at times, it appears the congregation was able to maintain its credit rating. Unfortunately, the only surviving archival item from those years, a Sunday bulletin ("The Church Builder") of Feb. 5, 1933, sheds no light as to the congregation's

<sup>24</sup>"Diamond Anniversary" bulletin, 1985; and scrapbook "Pastors," First Baptist Archives.

<sup>25</sup>Vol. 545, pp. 602-604, Deed Records, Jefferson County Archives.

financial status, even though 1933 was the worst of the depression years (the year the banks failed). The bulletin does indicate that all other facets of the church, from Cradle Roll Department on up, were progressing in excellent order.<sup>26</sup> Only oldtimers such as the writer might recall that churches also acted as welfare boards for their members and indigent elderly, there being no public facilities, food stamps, unemployment insurance - NO ANYTHING ELSE - to alleviate need in 1933. So bad were economic conditions in Port Neches that of about 20 rent houses then owned by the writer's father in Port Neches, only one occupant was employed and able to pay \$10 monthly rent. And the remainder did not even have money for food. My father used his own unsaleable farm surpluses, tons of potatoes, corn, vegetables, etc., to sustain them from hunger during those years.

The lowest point in First Baptist Church history came on the morning of January 10, 1940, when suddenly flames engulfed the beautiful, red brick sanctuary at Ave. B and Dearing St. So advanced and scorching were the conflagration and flames that the fire departments of three cities could do nothing except "hose down" adjoining buildings and allow the blaze to burn itself out. The loss amounted to \$50,000, which included all furnishings, pews, 7 pianos (one a new grand piano), library, and all church records. Nothing of value could be salvaged; only twisted girders, jagged brick walls, and porch columns survived, and all of that had to be leveled for safety's sake and in order to rebuild. After the meager insurance was applied to building liens, the church in essence had regressed to its position in 1927 - free of debt, but without a cent to rebuild with. The pastor, Rev. Youngblood, was ill in a Galveston hospital at the time of the fire.<sup>27</sup>

In the aftermath of the disaster, the deacons and trustees realized that the congregation had long since outgrown the 4 lots on Dearing Street, where there were no parking spaces or expansion room, and no thought was devoted toward rebuilding the church in its former mode of construction. In addition, the needs of European nations at war and rearmament at home had created significant building material shortages (because of camps and air bases under construction), that would preclude the rebuilding of the sanctuary in its former style. Hence, the frame structure still standing at Dearing and Ave. B was completed to serve the congregation only temporarily until the day when circumstances would permit the church's removal elsewhere. In anticipation of its removal

<sup>26</sup>"The Church Builder," Feb. 5, 1933, church archives.

<sup>27</sup>Beaumont Journal, Jan. 10, 1940; Beaumont Enterprise, Jan. 12, 1940.

the Board of Trustees purchased 24 lots in Block 23, Magnolia Addition, in 1945 from A. L. Brooks, E. V. Wright, and the Port Neches Realty Company for \$3,400.00.<sup>28</sup>

In 1942, Bro. Youngblood left for a pastorate in Louisiana, and was soon replaced by Rev. F. E. Swanner, who remained until 1944. Rev. Lonnie Webb, the new minister, remained in Port Neches for 6 years, during which time the Magnolia Street property was purchased, and plans for the present sanctuary, expected to seat 1,188 persons, began in 1949. He was succeeded in 1950 by Rev. S. M. Mulkey, who only stayed for one year. Rev. J. C. Clement, who eventually would build the lovely, blonde brick sanctuary, arrived as pastor in 1951.

In 1953, Maurice Walmer of Beaumont formulated the plans and specifications for the present church building, and construction began in 1954. Members donated much of the labor, and three years later, the first service was conducted in the spacious, new edifice on June 30, 1957, with "dinner on the grounds."<sup>29</sup> An application of 1953 reveals a lot about the church as of that year. There were 1,125 active members, of whom a net increase of 304 had been accomplished during the preceding five years. Over 500 persons contributed regularly toward church finances, of whom 225 were regular tithers. The application envisioned a sanctuary of 40,200 square feet, at an estimated cost of \$10 a foot, or \$402,000, not including air conditioning, educational building, or furnishings.<sup>30</sup>

In 1957, Rev. Clement departed from Port Neches for Central Baptist Church in New Orleans. His replacement was Bro. J. O. Morman, who remained until 1964. In June, 1961, the church celebrated a fiftieth anniversary homecoming, with a full Sunday of worship and a week of revival services. In 1964, Rev. Morman resigned, and was succeeded by Dr. Roy Lambert. As of February, 1967, there were 1,272 resident members and 261 others who lived elsewhere. There were 27 church deacons, and Sunday School enrollment was 1,076. During the five years that Dr. Lambert remained, there were "410 additions to the church, 181 of those being received by profession of faith," and 229 transferred from other Baptist churches. During the same period,

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<sup>28</sup>Vol. 605, pp. 486, 507, and Vol. 643, p. 323, Deed Records, Jefferson County Archives.

<sup>29</sup>"Diamond Anniversary, 1910-1985" bulletin, June 23, 1985; "Suggested Plans," May 4, 1949, "Records" and "Pastors" scrapbooks, First Baptist Archives.

<sup>30</sup>"Application for Church Loan, 1953" from the church to A. B. Culbertson Co., also in church archives.

"gifts to the church amounted to \$727,685. The pastor resigned in 1970 to become Superintendent of Missions for Golden Triangle Baptist Association.<sup>31</sup>

In 1971, Rev. W. D. Anthony arrived in Port Neches to succeed Dr. Lambert and began a pastorate that rivalled that of Rev. W. H. Fortney for longevity. In 1983, he resigned to accept a call to Mount Pleasant, Texas, and in 1984, Dr. Gaylon Riddle, a former staff member of East Texas Baptist University, arrived to replace him. The present pastor received his master's and doctoral degrees in theology from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1972 and 1975 respectively. In continuance of progress statistics, membership of First Baptist Church of Port Neches now (1986) amounts to 1,742 resident members and 401 non-resident, for a total of 2,143. There are 26 active deacons, and the church's auxiliary units in Christian education quickly become too numerous to describe in detail. The congregation's day care facilities, located in a former church building nearby, has enrolled 105 children with a staff of eleven.

It is regrettable that the names of so many church officers; supply, interim, and associate pastors; ministers of education, music, and youth must be omitted as well, but space and length so dictate. Also 34 former members have chosen to enter full-time Christian vocations as a result of their church affiliation here.

Today, seventy-six years in retrospect and a lifetime in hindsight, one can only impart a town's gratitude to the thousands of people who have been a part of First Baptist Church in the past for "a job well done." Perhaps most of the names of those thousands are no longer known, and certainly hundreds of them are either deceased or have moved away from Port Neches. Perhaps like their names and faces, many of their Christian endeavors and services to God, Church, and community are no longer recalled as well - except that they are not forgotten by our Lord above, the only One who counts in the long run anyway.

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<sup>31</sup>"Pastors" scrapbook; typescript, "First Baptist Church Began With 12 People," Feb. 11, 1967, in "Early History," church archives; also, Diamond Anniversary bulletin, 1910-1985, June 23, 1985.

The writer is eternally grateful to Dr. Riddle and his staff, also Mr. T. C. Reynolds and the historical committee, who have entrusted to my care this week 6 volumes of church pictures, data, clippings, letters, etc., without which this chapter could not have been written. Some pictures which will appear on subsequent pages are from these archives. W. T. B.