

SHAKING A FEW HISTORY TREES

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Ruhama Baptist Church happens to be one of the oldest churches in Alabama. With the 150th anniversary in the very near future, the historical committee has commissioned the preparation of a new, full history by 1969.

This writer is among those chosen to collaborate in writing the work. When time came for the annual birthday celebration, it was natural that the committee would call on one of the future authors of the church history to assist in presenting the anniversary program

In order to do something little different, and perhaps also to help in accumulating material which might be lodged in private collections, the author and his wife determined to prepare an audio-visual presentation. We decided to use the pictures and other memorabilia which could be shown with an opaque projector. In time some 35 mm slides also came to us, and ultimately we used both types of projectors. A narration was tape recorded and supplemented with appropriate music.

The church files had discouragingly little helpful information. Three enlargement programs since the end of World War II had apparently resulted in the loss of several files of older materials. Except for isolated pieces, most of our material found in the church office and library did not exceed 15 or 20 years of age.

On one Wednesday evening we made a plea to the supper and prayer meeting crowd to let us have, hopefully on a permanent loan basis, any old pictures, church bulletins, clippings, and so on, that might be in family papers.

A week later when we made the presentation, our problem was no longer one of not having material, but rather one of selecting the best pieces of illustrative material from the great pile that had come to us. Members had an amazing assortment of old items, generally old church bulletins, which do not otherwise seem to exist in a complete file. We also received many Sunday School, Vacation Bible School, and Training Union pictures.

Even more encouraging was the promise of other material. As members saw what we were using, realizing for the first time what we meant in calling for memorabilia, many came up after the program to say that they too had old pictures, programs, and clippings. Within our church, as it developed, was a store of material useful in the proper preparation of our sesquicentennial history.

One of the members of the historical committee, a retired school marm who sought to be helpful, agreed to scout around among sources outside the church. She thought first of all of the reference department of the public library. There she found more than a score of clippings dating back over a forty year period. We had Xerox copies made of some and were actually able to check out some of the others. And at the branch library near the church were three more clippings about the church.

This retired teacher, a long-time member of the church, knew many of the older members who had since moved away. She got in touch with some of them and in at least one instance turned up an extremely valuable scrap book. Some of the clippings in it date back to the first decade of Birmingham's life. Others tell about some of the nineteenth century members, who are not merely names in the church minutes but who take on personality and character because of this find. This was no doubt the most important single item which came out.

But it was not the only thing. Many other pieces which might have been lost forever in a few more years were given or loaned to us. Things which we cannot keep, we have duplicated. Others are being filed for use in the history of Ruhama's first 150 years, and later these will be deposited in the Special Collection of Samford University Library, where the finest collection of material on Alabama Baptist history has been assembled.

It was here that we turned up one of the most valuable photographs. Not only is there a bulky folder of ephemera accumulated by the curator of the collection, but there is a great deal of history of Ruhama Baptist Church in the early history of Howard College (Samford University) after its move to East Lake (Birmingham). An old photograph of the faculty of Howard College showed men who were outstanding in the church, and this is the only known photograph of some of them.

Ruhama Baptist Church has one of the best collections of its own official church records in the state of Alabama. Beginning with minutes from the first meeting, written in a legible hand by a literate scribe, to the present, there are only a few short gaps. And the records are in fine condition. The observation has been made that probably no church in Alabama has a better documentation of its past.

And yet with this fine collection, the story is filled with unanswered questions and unsolved riddles. We need every bit of information that can be shaken out of the history trees around the church and community. Perhaps some more vigorous shakes of the trees will bring forth other needed "plums."

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