

Salado church focuses on 140 years of precious memories_41904

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Charlene Carson reviews minutes of business meetings at First Baptist Church in Salado.

Salado church focuses on 140 years of precious memories

By George Henson

Staff Writer

SALADO—Looking forward to its 140th anniversary, First Baptist Church in Salado harkened back to its beginnings.

Three years ago, church members discovered some old photographs and documents, and they asked Charlene Carson to put them in a scrapbook.

But the images frozen in time fascinated her. She was afraid the scrapbook would simply sit on a shelf and never be seen by the majority of the church's members.



The church's children's choir, circa 1957.

"I have to get this out of a scrapbook and into a form where somebody will see it," Carson said.

She did, and the end product was a 248-page hardback book chronicling the church's history.

She decided she wanted to complete the project before the church's 140th anniversary celebration, May 14 and 16. Carson often worked 12-hour days as she pored over church minutes all the way back to May 28, 1864, when the congregation was organized.

Mundane church business dominated the records. But she also discovered nostalgic nuggets that pointed to the church's uniqueness.

One of the first things that surprised her was the list of charter members included no husbands and wives.

"There were men, and there were women, and even some listed as 'Mrs.', but none of them had the same last names. That really struck me, but I finally concluded that this being the third year of the Civil War, their husbands must have been off to war somewhere," Carson said.

Another interesting item was the identity of the pastor who held the longest tenure of the church's 47 pastors—George Washington Baines, great-

grandfather of future President Lyndon Baines Johnson. Baines served the church from 1868 until 1877.

Current Pastor Brian Dunks, who was called by the church in 1996, is in range to surpass that tenure next year.

The five bound volumes of the church's business meeting minutes were lost for many years, only to be discovered scattered throughout the church in various cabinets and closets in 1984, Carson said.

"It's amazing to me that they've survived when nobody had responsibility for caring for them, and that they weren't destroyed by fire or flood because Salado suffered both of those things," she said.



George Washington Baines served longest as pastor of First Baptist Church in Salado.

While the minutes of the business meetings were the primary sources of information for the church's history book, other artifacts also survived. They include a Sunday school quarterly from the 1880s, accounting books where church members pledged money to pay the pastor's salary, with some members pledging as little as 25 cents, and a ribbon given to all who

attended the first day of Sunday school at the church in 1878.

Carson said the challenging part of writing the book was to make it something people would enjoy reading.

"The hardest part was to get all these 140 years connected so that it would be reader-friendly," she said. "I wanted it to read more like a novel than a history book."

Despite the sometimes long days, she said it was a pleasure to do the research and writing.

"To me, it was really motivating, because I knew if I read those church minutes long enough, I would find something really interesting. A lot of it was the regular things that churches do, but every three or four pages there would be that gem, that jewel, and I would write that down," she said.

She included something for all 47 of the church's pastors—even the one who was there for only one business meeting. "The whole focus of that meeting was how they were going to finish paying the former pastor, and I think he may have taken that as a sign," she said.

"There are so many great characters who have played a role in the history of this church, and I just knew there had to be a great story in there. I also felt our church members needed to know that story. If you know the story, you know your roots. We have had so many people join our church in recent years; they need that connectedness," Carson said.

She and her husband, Maurice, moved to Salado four years ago after he retired as a NASA engineer and she as a schoolteacher.

Her husband played a big part in creating the book. After a publisher told them they could save \$3,000 to \$4,000 by laying out the book themselves, he bought publishing software, read the instructions and laid out the 248-

page book in two weeks of 12- to 14-hour days.

"Being an engineer, he decided he could do that and he did it," she said.

"There's no way anyone could realize how many hours have gone into this book—not just the writing, but the layout."

While most of the church members who wanted a copy of the \$35 book pre-ordered their copies, most subsequent sales have been to people in the community outside the church.

"I think that's because I wove into the history of the church the history of Salado—they're just so interrelated. Anyone in Salado interested in its history is interested in this book," she said.

Randy Carder, minister of music and senior adults at First Baptist Church in Salado, said the book has been an asset to him personally.

"I'm in my fifth year here, and for me it has kind of crystallized the culture of the church. It has given me a sense of why the people here are such strong people," he said.

Alan Lafever, director of the Texas Baptist Historical Collection, said writing a church history would be beneficial for any congregation. "We think it's important, because if you don't know where you've been, it's difficult to know exactly where you are on the journey and for sure where you're going," he said.

"A lot of time what churches do when they look back on their history is rekindle memories of past programs and people. Sometimes these memories of people causes the church to recall what that person's vision was for the church. Looking back on a church's history can call a church back to tasks they may have drifted away from."

Many churches do not attempt to write a history because they don't feel

they have enough information, but that often is not the case. "Most churches have more information than they realize; it's just a matter of finding it," he said.

Part of the process of finding the information is to let as many people as possible know you are looking for it. In Salado, the accounting books detailing the pastor's salary subscriptions were found in a residential attic. The Sunday school ribbon had been passed down for more than 125 years in a family that now attends the Methodist church.

"That's the biggest mistake churches make—not letting everyone know they are working on their history. Awareness is the key," LaFever said.

In the end, it pays big dividends for all involved, Carson said.

"When you get the whole history together, you see how the pieces fit together to make the whole. That's been the joy of writing this—to see how all the pieces fit together—to see how God has had his hand on this church from its very beginnings to make it the church it is today."

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