THE LIGHT ON THE PRAIRIE

THE HISTORY OF THE

CORYELL BAPTIST CHURCH

in 1855

and

The Story of

THE ENDEAVORS AND INFLUENCES

Wielded in the 100 Years

1955
THE LIGHT ON THE PRAIRIE

Coryell Church Organized

This story has its setting in the central part of Texas, but a little to the east. The territory is about thirty miles square and was more than thirty miles west of Waco. (All of that land with no churches.) The Prairie was fertile and well watered, which made it desirable as a location for homes. It was soon settled by the ever westward advance. Waco had had a church since 1851. Since the Pilgrims had landed on Plymouth Rock, William Penn had settled Pennsylvania, and Roger Williams had founded Rhode Island, it had been the custom of American people to institute a church wherein they might worship God soon after the homes were established. For these people in Coryell County, it was a long, tiresome journey to Waco to attend services. Then, too, the swiftest, most satisfactory mode of travel was an ox wagon. It took days to make the trip. There were no roads across the country and no bridges over the streams, and dangers from Indians were always present. Anyway, they just needed a church.

About 1850 the Army Engineers laid-out the military road through Fort Gates and west to Forts Griffin and Belknap.

Fort Gates was a few miles from Coryell Church and also a few miles from where Gatesville now stands. This road went up the divide between Lampasas and the Leon Rivers. This
gradually became the highway toward the west. It passed through the country which is now Coryell County. It was soon organized with Gatesville as the county seat. There the Methodist people established a Methodist Church and organized a Union Sunday School in 1854. By this time several families were settled in the Coryell Church community and they were interested in a home church.

Long ago the Lord had said, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in their midst." (Matthew 18:20). The population had increased; now a few could gather together in the name of the Lord, and they were ready to build an altar for the Lord. At an appointed time a number of Missionary Baptists met in the home of Brother Green Franks, and with the leadership of Brothers John Clabaugh and S. G. O'Bryan, the Light on the Prairie gleamed forth, and Coryell Missionary Baptist Church was instituted, with the following members:

- Green Franks
- James McIlhaney
- Minerva McIlhaney
- J. A. Green
- Jesse James
- Jesse Lee
- Martha Hicks

and possibly

- Adaline Franks
- Jane McIlhaney
- Margaret McIlhaney
- Sarah Ann Green
- Catherine James
- Rebecca Gibson
- Naomi Hall
- Wyatt Hall

#1897
They and their families were in attendance at every meeting. All the people of Coryell community were good people and many were Christians and members of Coryell Church. There was very little wickedness among the whole countryside. Members of this church or not, they usually attended Coryell. They were the Burlesons, Halls, Boyds, Striblings, Caldwell, Olivers, Fosters, Hickersons, Edwards, Graves, Merritts, Gibsons, Davis, McIlhaney's, Morris, Powells, Collards, Roes, Jordans, Kerbys, Comptons, Harrisons, Christians, Smiths, Bennetts, Stricklands, Andersons, Sheffield, Gunnins, Bernards, Crains, Gilcreases, Daniels, Jones, Crouch's, and many others who did just as much and were held in as high esteem, but whose names do not come to me right now. They were good people and built Coryell well.

Coryell was the mother church of Bluff Creek (now Osage), Rainey's Creek, Oglesby, and Tonk Creek, for a large number of their charter members were former members of Coryell, bearing their church letters with them. Two of these churches have disbanded, but Oglesby and Osage are still serving their communities and the Lord.

Leon River Baptist Association was organized in 1858. Z. N. Morrell tells us in his book, "Flowers and Fruits", "The year 1858 was one of
harmonious activity and progress among our people. Five new associations sprang into existence.

"I was present and took part in one of these organizations -- Leon River Association. Great destitution had prevailed in the counties of Bell, Williamson, and Coryell, until the voices of Elders John Clabaugh and John McClain declared the way of salvation to the people. Both of these were earnest men and men of God. They were well adapted to such a field, and the people heard them gladly. Possessed largely of the spirit of Christ, they were willing to work and their labor was of that effective kind which moves and induces the multitude to feel that Jesus of Nazareth passes by."

The first messengers to the Leon River Baptist Association from Coryell Church were Brethren James McIlhaney, J. Hicks, and A. D. Meroney. They met at Nolan Creek, in Bell County, September 24, 1858. They were to assist in the organization of the Leon River Baptist Association which is Coryell County Association. Gatesville First and Coryell Church have been represented at every session of the Association since its foundation.

Coryell has produced many leaders who were not ministers but laymen, who have built the invisible church and have assumed responsibilities that have helped the church to make progress.
They moved to Coryell County near Coryell Church in 1869, where he soon identified himself with the Leon River Association. While pastor of Coryell Church in 1874 he helped to organize Bluff Creek Church and became pastor. He was moderator of Leon River Baptist Association for fourteen years. Of his large family only two, Mr. Dan Graves and Miss Josephine Graves, are now living. They reside in Gatesville where they are highly esteemed by all.

The first minutes that we have of Coryell Church in conference is October 1885 when a layman, John Whitlock presided as moderator.

Sometimes no swift progress of growth and accomplishments of some pastors are noted, but this growth and progress has gone steadily forward and upward with each pastor doing his share and there has been growth in the church because of the growth in Godliness among the people.

MINISTERS AND THE WORK ACCOMPLISHED AFTER 1885

J. H. Rister -- 1885-1888

From the date of the organization of Coryell Church to 1885, the membership worshipped in the log schoolhouse. Usually they were on the ground
floor, but one Sunday when the weather was a little frosty, they went up-stairs where they could have a little fire. The weight of the congregation caused the floor to fall through to the floor below, precipitating the entire congregation to the room below. No one was seriously injured.

It now became necessary to start thinking of building a house of worship, and committees were appointed.

The building committee was W. J. G. McIlhaney, M. A. Dowis, and W. B. Fowler.

The finance committee was W. J. G. McIlhaney, M. A. Dowis, J. H. Morris, J. F. Strickland, and Ethan Allen.

The land was donated by Green Franks and Henry Hall.

The lumber for the building was cypress brought from California. Because of lack of funds and other handicaps, the building was not completed until 1888 and is the one in use today.

There is a possibility that there were many members whose names were on the roll prior to 1886 whose names have been lost. The church advised that the roll be revised. The names of those living in the community were put on a new
list, those who had moved away were left on the old roll, and these were the records that were lost.

During the pastorate of Reverend Rister the following united with the church by baptism:


J. M. Renfro Pastor 1888-1891

Coryell Church cooperated with First Baptist Church of McGregor and a revival was held in, or near, McGregor. Major W. E. Penn was the revivalist. He was a man of great earnestness and ability, usually won great victories and many souls for the Lord.

A little later J. M. B. Gresham of Moody conducted a revival at Coryell. Those received by baptism by Brother Renfro were:

McKelvain, Mr. and Mrs. N. E. Foster, I. D. Whitlock, J. N. Pitts, Mrs. Rice Harrison, Mr. and Mrs. J. R. Fagan, M. D. Compton, and Mrs. Butler.

This year the church gave $8.00 for all missionary purposes. This was with great effort on the part of the committee men and great sacrifice on the part of the farmers. The years 1887, 1888 and 1889 were dry years, and the farmer's gleanings had been little.

They began having services twice a month in 1888, the first time they had met more than once a month.

Conditions became a little brighter, and in 1891 in conference, the pledge was made for foreign missions - $5.00, state missions - $5.00, and ministerial relief - $5.00. They had increased as the Lord had increased their gleanings.

In October 1891 several people came to unite with Coryell by letter. Among them were Mrs. W. W. Kirkland, Mr. and Mrs. Felix Boyd, Mr. and Mrs. T. E. Stribling, Anna and Amanda Stribling. They at once took their places among the workers at Coryell Church.

T. E. Stribling was a layman who helped to keep the Light shining. He was ready for duty when called on. He helped organize the Sunday
School and became the first teacher for the brethren, with J. H. Morris as assistant. He served on committees and as a delegate to Associations and conventions. He was Church Clerk for several years and resigned in 1907 when he moved to Blue Ridge in Hamilton County. There he continued to serve the Lord until God called him home several years ago.

F. Boyd was a layman of great value to the Coryell Baptist Church and to the community. He came from Bluff Creek Church to join by letter. He was deacon, having been ordained by Bluff Creek Church. He served as a committee member, delegate to associations and conventions or in any place or position where he was needed.

There had been no Sunday School. He made the motion that Coryell Baptist Church organize a Sabbath School. This was done, and the following officers were elected:

Felix Boyd -- Superintendent
W. J. G. McIlhaney -- Assistant Superintendent
A. Cole -- Secretary and Treasurer
T. E. Stribling and J. H. Morris were elected teachers of the male classes. Mrs. S. B. Davis and Mrs. S. Kelton were elected teachers of the female classes. Brother Boyd was Superintendent for thirty years or longer.

Elder S. J. Caldwell was an ever faithful member who supplied often for the pastors.
Now the congregation had finished their church building. Winter was approaching and the church would have to be heated. Somebody suggested that they would have to buy a stove. Many thought they had given all they could on the building and missions, and as they were too poor, the idea was being turned aside when a dear old lady in the congregation took things in her hands. Grandma Whitlock drew a silver dollar out of her pocket, walked up and put it on the table. It was the last one she had, and she had earned it knitting socks for somebody. That was the first contribution, but not the last. Others contributed freely, collection was soon over and the stove was bought.

J. M. B. Gresham Pastor 1891-1900

Brother Gresham was born in Georgia in 1856. He was baptized when he was fifteen years old. In 1884 he came to Texas and soon was pastor at Moody. He was pastor of many churches in Central Texas. He held a revival at Coryell in 1890, a little later he was called as pastor of Coryell.

In August 1892 Phil H. Montague was requested, after a vote of the church, to bring an organ and lead the singing for the meeting. That was the first musical instrument ever used in Coryell Church. Later the conference of the church discussed the idea of purchasing an organ.
On motion and second, the committee was appointed to buy the organ. There was one member who opposed the idea so strongly that he withdrew fellowship from the church because the motion carried and the organ was bought and used in the church.

W. J. G. McIlhaney was sent as a delegate to the Sunday School Convention in Dallas in June 1893. He was the first delegate ever sent to the Sunday School Convention by this church. Brother McIlhaney was born in Mississippi in 1839. His father, James McIlhaney was born in Ireland, and he, with his wife Jane Gibson McIlhaney, were charter members of this church. In February of 1893 Brother McIlhaney resigned as Clerk of the Church after serving for several years.

In 1853 the McIlhaney's came to Texas, and in 1854 they came to Coryell County. He lived here until the Lord called him to his heavenly home. Uncle Billy, as he was lovingly called, served his country as a soldier and his Lord as a servant. He married Miss Mollie Carter in 1867.

Brother Alex Cole was elected to fill the place made vacant by Brother McIlhaney's resignation and held the office of Church Clerk for several years.

There was no organized church at Oglesby.
Coryell was invited by a committee to hold a revival meeting at Oglesby, September 1893. Brother N. A. Seale of Gatesville did the preaching. The following were united to Coryell Church:

Mr. and Mrs. R. J. Walker, Mr. and Mrs. D. R. Boone, J. J. Smith, Mrs. Lankford, Lizzie Day, Mrs. S. M. Smith, Mrs. L. S. Smith, Cancy Ann Smith, George Walker, Pearl Gardner, Mrs. Selia Jones, W. A. McIlhaney, Eli Lankford.

Brother Alex Cole resigned as Church Clerk November 1894, and Brother T. E. Stribling was elected to fill the office.

In September the following were dismissed by letter to organize the First Baptist Church of Oglesby:

T. R. Martin, Roberta Martin, Mr. and Mrs. W. F. Day, Pearl Gardner, Dorothy Beaty, Mr. and Mrs. Eli Langford, Maggie Langford, Mr. and Mrs. L. A. Wood, Mrs. M. C. Compton, Jeff Wood, Mrs. A. E. Rogers, Mr. and Mrs. J. J. Smith, Miss Louvena Morris, Mr. and Mrs. J. H. Morris, Walter Beaty, and Dr. and Mrs. D. M. Jordan.

Brother Gresham became their pastor. The following were added to Coryell in the nine or ten years he was pastor:
ville. He served in some city churches but preferred country churches.

He conducted a revival at Coryell in August 1900. Brother R. H. Gibson conducted one in August 1901. From the two revivals the following were added to the church:

Jessie Edwards, Jennie Luck, Bertha Kirkland, Lula Edwards, Bettie Graves, Vida Edwards, Belle Dowis, Della Foster, Beulah Thompson, Johnnie Goddard, Nancy Jones, Metta Kirkland, Macy Compton, Jeff Edwards, Belle Dodgion, Alice Harrison, Ethel McIlhaney, Katie Mattox, Susie Mattox, Irene Collard, Mary Nunley, Mr. and Mrs. W. Joe Stribling, Fred Boyd, Quince Merrit, Alma Barnard, and Ina Merritt.

R. H. Gibson -- Pastor 1903 - April 1905

Brother Gibson was the first native Coryell minister to be pastor of Coryell Church. He was son of Mr. Ephriam Gibson and Rebecca Gibson, she was one of the charter members. He was grandson of two others, Brother James and Sister Jane McIlhaney.

In 1903 they were to have a revival but the preachers could not be there in time for the meeting to begin. The congregation did not let that be a handicap; they started the meeting by
having prayer meeting among themselves at every service until the pastor and Brother W. H. Wynn did arrive. Needless to say, they had a good meeting. The following were added to the church during Brother Gibson's pastorate by baptism:


The church agreed to cooperate with the Association upon hiring a missionary for the county.

A. N. Porter -- April 1905 - September 1906

Brother Porter was born in Kay County, Kentucky in 1874 and was educated in Clinton College and Baylor University. He was converted and joined the Baptist Church, and in a short time he felt the call to preach. When he was elected as pastor of the Calvary Baptist Church in San Antonio, they called for his ordination. He was ordained by his home church.