

SALEM

The name Salem, a Hebrew word meaning *peace*, has been given to four communities in Arkansas. The one in Ouachita County is located just southwest of Bearden. The community began to grow in the 1840s when farmers from southeastern states sought land in the new state of Arkansas. Among them were the Gammill and Lindsey families who chose the area that would become Salem. Many of their descendants still live in the area today.

In June 1862 Salem was the scene of a Confederate recruitment effort during which many local men enlisted. A large number of these were organized into Company K of the 33rd Arkansas Infantry. The 33rd participated in several major battles in Arkansas and Louisiana. An 1864 Union reconnaissance map reveals that at that time Salem was located on the Camden to Chambersville Road and had a good ford across nearby Two Bayou. The area had a church, two doctors, and several large farms.

The community has always been centered round the church, which was established in 1848 as “the Regular Baptist Church of Christ at Salem.” In an article written for *Saga of Bearden* in 1976, long-time church member and choir director Marion L. Lindsey reported that the first meetings were held in a log cabin which was located across the road from the later church buildings. The source of this information was probably his uncle Edmund H. Lindsey, who was ordained about 1860 and served as pastor at Salem on and off for many years. Other early pastors at Salem were J.S. Thomas, James M. Blackwell, Lawrence O. Myers and B.V. Hultsman. George Smith was pastor in 1885 when a new church was built at a cost of \$262.70.

Dr. Bill Attebery, who attended church at Salem from the 1930s until the mid-1950s, recalled this building. “The building where I attended church was not the one that stands in that location now. It was a white wood-frame building with a high ceiling. The building had one door on the south side and, I think, two on the west side. The building was heated by a tall wood-burning stove. In winter a fire was started at the beginning of the service unless someone got there early and started it. Lighting came from gas lights. All of the pews were made of wide pine boards with few, if any, knots in them. The backs were perpendicular to the seats. There were no cushions. There was a raised section at the front for the pulpit and the choir. The choir was made up of anyone who wanted to be in it. The church did not have preaching every Sunday. Pastors of other churches came to preach at designated times. We did have Sunday school each week with very few exceptions. The adult class met in the choir area, and Marion Lindsey was the teacher most of the time. Other classes met in other areas of the church. The small children’s class was called the ‘card class.’ Each child got a new card each week with a picture on one side and a short lesson on the other. The church had no baptistery. Baptisms took place at a nearby pond that had once been a sawmill pond.”

In 1954 the church was renamed Salem Missionary Baptist Church, and the next year a new building with four small classrooms replaced the 1885 structure. Patricia Nowlin Lindsey contributed several details about church activities of that time. “During construction the pews were set out under the trees, and meetings were held outdoors. We always had a big revival in the summer. Baptisms took place in various local gravel pits. Salem was well-known for its singing. About once a year other area churches would come for a big ‘all-day singing’ and potluck dinner. The church had a small converted

school bus that would pick up any interested ones. At that time we had both morning and evening services, but for several years Salem only had services on alternate Sundays when a minister from another local church would come to preach. Some of the visiting ministers were Robert Roach, B.G. Garner and Otis Reddin. When Harold Harper became pastor, meetings were held regularly.” The church remained active into the 1980s, but the building stands empty today. A new roof was added in 2016 in an attempt to preserve the historic structure until it can be renovated.”

Salem Cemetery, one of the oldest cemeteries in Ouachita County, surrounds the church on three sides. It is divided into several sections with the oldest graves being found near the entrance gates along Ouachita Road 247. The first documented burial is that of Susan Culp Moon in 1852, but there are older unmarked graves and a number of illegible stones. The tombstones preserve the names of the early residents of the Salem area: Lindsey, James, Byars, Gammill, Vaughan, Mays, Barner and many others. The families of those buried there come together on the second Saturday in May for a traditional “Decoration Day.”

In 1853 eight acres in Section 16 of Township 12 South 15 West was reserved for a church and school, and Moses P. Gammill donated an additional two acres. The aforementioned E.H. Lindsey was the teacher in 1860. The 1880 census lists Samuel T. Boggs as a teacher. County records show that in 1898 Abana Masonic Lodge #271 deeded a small parcel of land across the road to the directors of School District #2: Alex Gammill, W.H. Harris and James H. Calaway. This school house was a white two-story building with a small bell tower and a wide covered porch across the front. A photograph made about 1915 shows teacher Mabel Jordan Harris with twenty-seven students. County records from 1920-21 list school directors W.C. Gammill, J.O. Moon and Amos Pedron. At that time Orland C. Harris was the teacher. He was paid \$100 per month for a period of seven months. There were twenty-five males and fifteen females in attendance. According to Dr. Bill Attebery, both O.C. and his wife Mabel Harris taught at one time; he on the first floor and she on the second. Local historian Benny Byars reported, “In 1925 the school consolidated with Bearden. When the school closed, the bell was moved to Bearden High School. It was placed on a stand outside the auditorium and was used to announce class changes for many years.” The land once occupied by the school is now part of the newest section of Salem Cemetery.

Submitted by Carolyn Cox