

The Mid-century Years

Bro. Cleo W. Pate became the pastor in 1948. Bro. Cleo was the twin brother of Bro. Leo Pate, long time pastor at Liberty Hill. It could also be noted that Bro. Leo Pate preached Archie Lilly's funeral. The church was still only having preaching two Sundays a month. Bro. Cleo Pate served as pastor in 1949 and into 1950, but it does not seem that he brought the divisive issue, brewing among missionary Baptists on the state and national levels, to the attention of the congregation. He was a pastor of local raising, and may not have been well aware of what was going on. However, in 1951, he was followed by another young, local pastor, Bro. Charlie Wilbanks. This young preacher witnessed a lot of hurt feelings at Mt. Sylvia, caused by the controversy of the split. Exactly what became of Bro. Charlie Wilbanks is not entirely known. It was reported that he moved to Arizona and died there. It is thought that he left the ministry. A vote at Mt. Sylvia was not taking during the time he was pastor, but when he left the church it was deeply divided over the issues.

There was a church started in town out of this movement, and Bruce Willson and his family joined that church. This is part of the reason that J. L. Willson was ordained by South Jefferson Baptist Church and served the churches of the North American Baptist Association (today called the Baptist Missionary Association) in the country of Australia. However, J. L. Willson was the product of the ministry of Mt. Sylvia, and her first foreign missionary. He is still serving the Lord in Australia, although in poor health. In 2000, Mt. Sylvia sent David Thompson, to Australia as part of the Olympic Bible Distribution Project.

Bro. Herbert Banks pastored from October 1951 to October 1952. Although the state and national split had occurred in 1950, the church minutes record a vote in 1952 at Mt. Sylvia. The question was, "to continue to fellowship in the Hopewell Association or join the North American Baptist Association." It is interesting that the Hopewell Association was a local association and the NABA was a national association, but that was the proposition. Pearl, who was only a child during this time of division in the church, remembers Bro. Banks and the previous pastor, Bro. Charlie Wilbanks, visiting in their home and discussing the pros and cons. Bro. Bank favored remaining in the Hopewell Association and his wife suggested to Mr. Albert Holcomb, Pearl's father, that "If he would just make sure that all his children were present and voting, the matter could be securely settled." Mr. Albert replied that he did

not believe in playing politics in church with his children's votes. The church did vote to continue in the Hopewell Association.

The church began, about this time, to support Bro. Kabsu Kim, a Korean national, going to school at the Missionary Baptist Seminary in Little Rock. Bro. Kim returned to Japan, the place of his birth, and ministered there. He also worked in Romania and Korea and at the current time is ministering in Japan again. The church has supported him continually since those early days. He was a missionary endorsed on the national level, by the American Baptist Association, from which the NABA split.

The courtships of the young adults at Mt. Sylvia in the mid 1950's had a profound impact on the history of the church. For many years the young people of Mt. Sylvia had married within the community or at least in a nearby community. However, the girls seeking husbands in the mid 50's, were looking in town. Anne Willson's story included a 41 model Ford. Her beau was a young mechanic, Newman Surratt, from Linden. Newman's father worked at the Refinery. The story was told that he made adjustments to her car, so that she would have need of his skills. Of course, he was quick to make the repair, free of charge.

Odis Homer, a returning GI from Farmers Academy, was the one who caught Jan Cox's eye. Odis had been born in Colorado City in West Texas. His parents had met and married in the Winfield area and returned to East Texas while Odis was young. He was raised in a church at Farmers Academy that is no longer in existence. After playing football and graduating from Mt. Pleasant High School, he joined the U. S. Army. He ended up at the Tokyo Arsenal in charge of a mess hall. His time in Japan influenced his world view and would give him much in common with the pastor that came to Mt. Sylvia in the spring of 1994.

Odis and Jan were the first to be married in a Mt. Sylvia church building. This was June 26, 1954. Bro. T. P. Lee, Odis' pastor at Farmers Academy performed the wedding ceremony. It was a usual practice, before this, for young couples to go to the preacher's home or find him, to be married without the frills of elaborate ceremonies or receptions.

Odis was elected to teach the adult Sunday School class at Mt. Sylvia the Sunday after their wedding. Eventually he was ordained as a deacon and has served as adult Sunday school teacher for more that forty five years. Odis and Jan moved to town, first to West 11th Street and then, to Carr Street on the east side of Mt. Pleasant and moved their membership

to Highland Park Baptist Church. After they moved their membership back to Mt. Sylvia in 1960, he was soon re-elected to that position. In 1967, they built a home on the place that Richard and Tennie had purchased from the other Brownlee heirs. Jan told of continuing to go to Syble's young people's class. She considered the adult class for her parent's age group.

Odis was an electrician at Lone Star Steel and Jan worked her way up into management after beginning as a telephone operator for AT & T. The shift work at Lone Star Steel made faithfulness to church a challenge. A near death experience happened to Odis when a pipe hit him in the head. As a man around him was crying, "He is dying!" Odis was praying that God would let him live to raise his two sons. God granted that request and even gave him the opportunity to raise his grandson, Corey, later in his life. After retiring from the phone company to care for her mother in her senior years, Jan spent several years working on the switchboard at Titus County Regional Hospital.

One of Jan's most notable works in the church included her many years as Vacation Bible School director. She also served a number of years as church clerk and the author of much of the weekly bulletin. Her inside scoop (one would guess that comes from being a telephone operator) was useful in keeping everyone informed of the happenings of our young people and the passing of the elderly in the community. She was also the author of the 1994 Memorial Service quotations included in this book. She was also known to write poetry, but she usually threw it away after only one public reading.

Maybe that is where her son Randy got his talent for composing music. One of his songs honoring Tom Landry being let go as coach of the Dallas Cowboys was sung at several church gatherings. Other more spiritual creations were a blessing to both young and old. When he was pianist at Mt. Sylvia, he would warm up at this piano before the worship service. Many times he would play original creations.

Bro. Byron Mason came to the church in 1953 and stayed through 1956. At his hands the church baptized several. Larry Reese was baptized July 26, 1953. In 1956, the church reached an enrollment high of 85 and the next pastor following Bro. Mason was the first full time pastor. The first pastor to hold weekly services at Mt. Sylvia was Bro. Bradley Reed. Although some of the pastors since that time have worked part time jobs to supplement their incomes, the church has continued to have preaching services every week for the last fifty years.

Dean Reese also found a husband outside of the community. Actually, she found him while grocery shopping. Her husband, Billy Allen, was a meat cutter. Besides working in a supermarket and later in a packing plant, Billy ran his own store. Dean was also of an entrepreneurial spirit. She started a daycare service. After Billy became disabled by a stroke, she trained for a career as an auditor for Nursing Homes.

Billy's parents were also remembered in the 1994 memorial service. The memorial said, "In Memory of Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Allen, the parents of Bro. Bill. I can remember after 'Momma Corbie' died, Bill and Dean took care of Thomas in their home until his death."

Billy and Dean were married February 26, 1956. Billy had been baptized at Mt. Sylvia just a couple of weeks before that. Dean has also been active with the youth, having gone to youth camps with her children and grandchild, teaching in Vacation Bible Schools and working in the church's Bible club program for the younger children. While the Homers were at Highland Park, Verna McKelvey was called from the young people to teach the adults and Dean was called into service, one year, to teach the teens.

Syble Brownlee is remembered by some, as a teacher of the teens. She remembers when Jan Cox, Anne Willson, Dean Reese, and Tex Lilly were teenagers. She remembers, in 1958, when the church called Bro. Reed, a young single fellow, that he also attended her Sunday evening Bible study class. "He was just one of my kids," she fondly recalls.

Bro. Reed, upon checking his own notes, reported that he preached at Mt. Sylvia from February 1958 to August 1959. He married his wife October of 1958 while serving as pastor at Mt. Sylvia the first time. The first son was born the month after they left Mt. Sylvia.

Pearl and J. C. Swafford was married during Bro. Reed's pastorate. Bro. Reed was living at Henderson, so their wedding took place in the home of Bro. Hull Horton, June 5, 1959. He was chosen because of Pearl's great love and respect for him. Pearl told of Bro. Horton losing his eyesight in his senior years. He continued to recognize Pearl's voice and greeted her warmly, saying, "I know you. I married you and you all have stayed together." They have continued to stay together until this day having celebrated 47 years of marriage.

Bro. Harvey Wilson pastored in the interval between Bro. Reed's two pastorates. There is a great colored picture of Bro. Harvey Wilson baptizing while he was pastor here. He was baptizing in Mr. Huey Crooks' pool. Doyle Brownlee, Dickie Crooks and Gary

Holcomb were the ones being baptized. The date was July 3, 1960. No one was able to locate a picture of a baptism at Wagon Bed although many reported that location as being where they were baptized.

Bro. Reed returned with his wife, Loretta, and their son Michael in October 1961. He continued to preach at Mt. Sylvia until April 1962. His most remembered experience at Mt. Sylvia was the baptisms of Huey Joe and Anne Ruth Crooks. Mr. Huey Crooks who later was ordained as a deacon at Mt. Sylvia was a lineman for the electric company that served the city and was not into going to church during this period of his life.

Larry and Sue Reese were married in August of 1961. Larry had served in the National Guard and had been raised at Mt. Sylvia, but Sue was raised at Gladewater. She was a faithful member there until their daughter, Angie, made a profession of faith at Mt. Sylvia on September 12, 1976. The following Sunday Angie was baptized at Mt. Sylvia. Sue served for many years as church clerk, and Larry and Sue's other daughter, Karen, was baptized July 9, 1978.

In the 1994 memorial service Sue's family was honored with the following words:

In memory of Mr. Wallace Bohanan, Sue's Father, Jack Bohanan, Sue's twin brother, and Edith Foster, Sue's sister. It seemed that these family members of Sue's died an untimely death. Her dad, Mr. Wallace, was a devout family man, gentle and kind. Sue's twin brother, Jack, died at 8 years old from being run over by a car near their home on the Harts Bluff Road; and Edith, her sister, died of cancer at age 45. Edith and I shared birthdays (02-07-37).

Larry and Dean, brother and sister, the children of T. A. and Mary Helen Reese, took turns leading the singing. For many years Larry worked in the refinery and gas business and worked every other Sunday. Both are talented musicians and often sang solos. Larry's rendition of "I Believe" was always so moving. After he retired, he was always in attendance and such an encouragement to his elders.

Bro. Wilmer Bidy was the pastor who brought a degree of stability to Mt. Sylvia. He was pastor from 1963 to 1970. Bro. Bidy lived in Cass County and commuted into Mt. Sylvia, bringing his entire family. He and his wife had seven children, four boys and three girls. The oldest was 16 when they first came, and the youngest was 3 years old. One of his daughters is Marsha Homer, who is currently a member.

The story was told of Bro. Bidy having confronted the man who lived directly across from the church. The confrontation was brought on because this man mowed his grass every Sunday morning about church time. In those days the church met in a wood frame church with no air conditioning. In the summer time the open windows were the only source of cooling. Of course, there was no public address system at Mt. Sylvia. The story was related that Bro. Bidy threatened to beat the man up if he continued the practice. The good news is that the man chose another time to mow, probably while the preacher was back in Cass County.

Tex Lilly left the community when he joined the Air Force during the Korean War. He served his country honorably as an airplane mechanic. He also found his wife outside of the community at Farmers Academy. She was the daughter of Mrs. Stella Price. In the 1994 memorial service her mother was remembered with the following words, "In Memory of Mrs. Stella Price, Martha's mother. Mrs. Price was an inspiration to her children; the spiritual leader in their home." Before returning to Mt. Sylvia, Tex made a profession of faith at Farmers Academy and was re-baptized. He and Martha joined Mt. Sylvia by letter on July 3, 1963, during Bro. Bidy's ministry here. Their children, Steve and Kathrine were raised here and encouraged into active participation in the church's program.

One of Bro. Bidy's daughters, Marsha, was saved and baptized at Mt. Sylvia. Although she married someone else and had three daughters in that marriage, she was baptized on the same day as the man who would later become her husband, Ronny Homer. The date was August 6, 1967.

Bro. J. T. McNabb came as pastor in 1971. He lived in the Blossom Community in Red River County. He also commuted to the church and did not live in the community. He only pastored into 1972.

In 1973, Bro. Keenan Witcher, another young unmarried fellow took up the challenge of being Mt. Sylvia's pastor. He moved into the Willson house, across the street from Tex Lilly. This is the same house that was later purchased by Odis Homer and moved to his lot at Lake Bob Sandlin. Several church events were held at this house after it was moved. Bro. Witcher continued as pastor until 1975. From here he went to the mission field in New Mexico. He was sponsored by Mt. Sylvia and was well liked. However, a great misunderstanding occurred in 1989. The story is told that Billy and Dean Allen and Jan and

Odis Homer decided to take a vacation together in the direction of New Mexico. They visited the missionary when they arrived in his area. Their goals were to encourage him and pay him a friendly visit. However, evidently things were not going well, and he construed their visit to be spying and took offence. This turned out to be a disappointing end to Mt. Sylvia's first interstate mission effort.

The records record that one church near Henderson, when informed of the situation requested, their offering be returned. It was returned. If one were trying to find the bright side of this story, Bro. Witcher is still pastoring in New Mexico. He is pastor of a self-sufficient Baptist church. He is still preaching God's Word.

The next pastor who came in 1976 was a graduate of Texas Baptist Institute. He is still fondly remembered. On November 13, 1981, the Mt. Pleasant Daily Tribune, published the following article entitled, Clergyman of the week:

Pastor of the Mt. Sylvia Missionary Baptist Church on Harts Bluff Road is the Reverend Mervin Toby Soileau. This is his first pastorate having come here six years ago from the Henderson Baptist Institute and Seminary.

Soileau was born in Basile, Louisiana and married his wife, Rowana, in 1970, She also attended TBI for two years. She is a musician and is proficient at the piano which is an asset to her husband's ministry.

The Soileaus have three children, all boys, Avery age 9, Damon will be four in December and Todd two years old in November this year.

Brother Soileau is a mission minded person and has make arrangements for foreign ministry in Marseille, southern France. He expects his call to become effective any time. Perhaps in the next few months he and his family will be leaving this country. He said that he had visited the area four years ago spending 14 days there. He speaks the language and says the dialect is very similar to that spoken in his home town of Basile.

The Lord has blessed the Mt. Sylvia Church, it is growing so fast we having to expand our facilities. We are now in a building program," Brother Soileau said.

The way things were in 1982 was described in the 1982 *History of Mt. Sylvia* in the following paragraphs.

Our present membership stands at 73. This membership contains the families of the founding fathers which have been recognized. But it is a dynamic membership also. Three more families can take their place

in the history of Mt. Sylvia Church—The Easterlings, the Fergusons, and most recently the Eberts. They joined the descendants of the founding fathers in living the verse, “As for me and my house, we shall serve the Lord.” Joshua 24:15.

A few years ago, Bro. Toby Soileau began a successful program of visitation that increased church attendance. We found we needed new classroom space. A vision for a new building soon arose. And thanks to faithful tithing, and generous contributions of money and plain hard work, we are sitting in this beautiful building today.

We are thankful for this new building. It is a symbol that our church has as strong a future as it has a past. My husband contends that you can tell how bright a future a church has by the number of babies crying during the sermon. How proud we are of our babies, from our youngest, Nicole Easley, to our teenagers. For they are our hope, our guarantee, that we will be worshipping at Mt. Sylvia and the Gospel will be preached until Jesus comes again.

The Fergusons and the Eberts and others who joined during the growth discussed above moved their membership to other churches. However, the Easterling family became a permanent part of the Mt. Sylvia family. Brian and Timothy were raised to adulthood in the church. Brian and Felicia were married at Tankersly Garden, June 25, 1994. Felicia was the daughter of Chas and Willie Mae Hobson. Bro. Hopson was an active pastor for many years among missionary Baptists. Brian and Felicia continue to serve God in missionary Baptist churches in the Metroplex. They were first involved in Northgate in Irving and are currently involved with a mission work in Grapevine.

Bro. James Bell and his wife, Myrtle, came to minister at Mt. Sylvia in 1983, and stayed for three years. All during Bro. Bell’s ministry, he had pastored local churches. The Mt. Pleasant Daily Tribune was calling their pastor profiles, “Pastor of the Week” when they ran this article about Bro. Bell.

James N. Bell Jr., pastor of the Mt. Sylvia Baptist Church, is a native of Titus County, born January 31, 1924 to James N. (Jim) and Lucy Smith Bell. He attended school at East Ward and Mt. Pleasant High School, graduating in May 1942. The same year in August he and Myrtle Randle of Talco were married.

I worked as Western Union Messenger until I entered the U. S. Army in May, 1943. I served in the Infantry. My basic training was at Camp Roberts, in California and 14 months with the 32nd Infantry Division in the South Pacific. I was wounded on Leyte Island in the Philippine, and then discharged in June 1945 with a Bronze Star and a Purple Heart. Bell said.

“It was in 1950 I entered the ministry, Bell said, “and I went to college at East Texas State University, Texas Baptist Institute and Seminary at Henderson. I have had all my ministry in the Hopewell Baptist Association: Old Union for 15 years, Hickory Hill for nine and one-half years, four years at Liberty Hill, one year at Argo and at present I am pastor of Mt. Sylvia Baptist Church. I was Moderator of the Hopewell Baptist Association for four years from 1978-82.”

Brother Bell and his wife have two children, Darlene Horn and Donald Bell. “We also have four grandchildren, Terry and Michael Horn and Bryan and Mellissa Bell,” he said.

Bro. Bell and Myrtle were beloved at Mt. Sylvia. After retiring from the pastorate due to health problems, he continued to do fill in preaching. He was honored by the Hopewell Association with a memorial page in the 2004 Minute Book. His wife passed away in 2006 and was buried at Gladewater. He continues to hold membership at Liberty Hill.

Karen and Donald Parr were married November 2, 1982. They were the first couple married in the new church building. They raised their two boys, Dustin and Drew at Mt. Sylvia. Karen worked for Lone Star Steel out of high school. Donald continues to be employed by Texas Utilities. He worked in their coal mines until they reduced operations in the Mt. Pleasant area. After a brief lay off period, which he used wisely to help at the Betel Mission building project, he was rehired by TU to drive a train. Their house, nearer to town, was bought out by the mine, and they relocated to an acre of Larry and Sue’s historic property. They are another family, who moved some distance away, that God allowed to come back to the cradle of peaceful living at Mt. Sylvia. Donald was from a historical missionary Baptist family in the Liberty Missionary Baptist Church in the Blodgett community. He moved his membership from there in September 14, 1994, after they built their new house at Mt. Sylvia.

Feed trucks for the chicken farms and dirt trucks hauling away sand, have in recent years disturbed the tranquility of the country living, but there have always been people whose personal ambition and land ownership have run amuck with the tranquility of the neighborhood. Big Sandy, the area just east of the old Mt. Sylvia church grounds, has long been known for its deep sand beds. Many today think that the size of the trucks and the many trips made in and out each day, will soon result in the all the sand of Big Sandy residing somewhere else.