

A REPORT ON BRIARPATCH CHURCH

by Scott Jacobs

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Briarpatch Methodist Evangelistic Church is one of the oldest landmarks in Waleska (the Paul Boston home is older, having been built before the Civil War). The church is a has-been, a holdover from the past. Only the senior citizens of Waleska can remember its heyday. Yet, much of the history of Cherokee County and Waleska is locked within those old walls. Briarpatch Church is a great heritage for us today.

Briarpatch Church was founded in 1834 by Lewis Warlic Reinhardt, a member of the then numerous and influential Reinhardt family, who had moved to Waleska a few years previously. Lewis Reinhardt was buried in the Briarpatch graveyard in 1884, and his marker still stands today. Evidently, when the church was started, there were quite a few briars in the vicinity and thus, the church was tagged Briarpatch, and the name has stuck ever since.

There were no Baptist churches in the area when Briarpatch was started, and indeed, a Baptist Church was not built in Waleska until the middle nineteen hundreds. As one senior citizen of Waleska put it, "You had to go preachin', everybody had to go to preaching', and everybody went!" So Briarpatch's congregation grew as the county grew and both Methodists and Baptists attended the services there.

Another feature of Briarpatch Church made its reputation spread---the camp-meetings. These were open-air services that often lasted for as long as ten days. People from miles around would load up provisions and head for the church when camp-meetings were held. Many people had set up permanent shelters at Briarpatch for the camp-meetings, but many others slept on the ground and cooked over campfires. Mrs. Elizabeth Bailey of Waleska tells about her memories of the camp meetings.

"I remember hearing my father (D.P. Moss) talk about the camp-meetings of that time. One particular thing that he enjoyed telling was attending a service. I'm not sure of the location from his conversation. The tent was not a canvas tent as we think of it but more a brush arbor. So he told of having a little dog that followed him to a service one night, and it seems to have been an exceptionally moving service because some women began to shout, and of course, the little dog began to bark, and he, being just a small boy, was amused by that, so he clapped his hands, you know, and the dog barked that much louder. I think his daddy gave him a spanking for that when he got home."

The most famous of all the Waleska camp-meetings was held in 1884. IT was estimated that over five hundred people attended that meeting. Mr. Cheater Tarpley, a long-time member of Briarpatch Church, reminisces, "Well, Mr. Fincher was telling me one day that they had a sort of camp-meeting there and Mr. Fincher said there was a Pitman woman, she's buried out there. She got to shouting one day in the service, and then she just dropped off dead, and he said they never did bring her home, said they let her stay in the church until they got ready to bury her out there."

Unfortunately, the popularity of the camp-meetings dropped and the last one was held in the late 1800s. All traces of these camps have disappeared.

A church building was erected some time in the middle 1800s, but it burned in the early eighteen hundred eighties (the exact dates of this first building were impossible to find and so these dates are approximations based on the information I found).

In the later 1880s or early 1890s, a new building was erected (the present building). Some of the timber for the church was cut by Mr. Jesse Fincher (Mr. Fincher died in November 1974, and he is buried at Briarpatch). The church in the late eighteenth hundreds was expanding rapidly. Membership climbed and in the eighteenth eighties went past the hundred mark. In 1888, there were five Sunday Schools in the area surrounding Canton. The churches employed about 30 officers and teachers and there were 375 students. Total cost for literature was about \$8.00.

Briarpatch Church was known under a variety of names----Waleska Mission, Walesca Academy, Reinhardt's Chapel, or Walesca Camp. The Quarterly Conferences for the church were very important in that they kept the church from backsliding into total confusion. Cherokee County was, at that time, growing very rapidly and the number of new members joining the church kept it in a state of chaos. The church records had been neglected and at one Quarterly Conference, over fifty names of people long dead or moved away were struck off the membership list. The church calmed down somewhat in the early nineteenth hundreds, though, and all was well. It was about nineteen ten that the spelling of Walesca became Waleska. The roads in this part of Cherokee County were not in the best condition (in fact it was the 1930s before highway 130 was first graveled), and evidently the Waleska Highway, which at that time ran in front of the church instead of behind it, became very muddy and presented a problem at times.

The preacher at Briarpatch (Reinhardt Chapel) was expected to be the president of Reinhardt College (or was it the other way around?) at the same time.

A couple of the most famous preacher-presidents were Rev. P.F. Eakes---1890-91, and Rev. C. Evans Pertillo----1891-1894. In 1912, the preacher's salary was \$250. It was in the early nineteenth hundreds that Reinhardt College built their own building in which the church services could be held. The Methodist's meeting place, therefore, moved to that building and Briarpatch Church was used only in the summer and for funeral services. This state of affairs continued for many years and Briarpatch Church was slowly going to ruin. It was in the 1940s, though when the doom of Briarpatch Church seems to descend. Mr. C. Tarpley tells about it. "We used it (Briarpatch) sorta like only in the summertime. There's a few summers that they didn't use it. We got to going out there in the summertime----through the summertime services. Now Dr. Burgess (President of Reinhardt College), he and Lee Mackey, they didn't like to go out there much. So one night we were going to vote to decide whether or not to continue. We had day and night services, too, when Green (Reynolds Green--one-time pastor of Waleska Methodist Church) was here. So they brought a bunch out from the college, you know, so they could out-vote us. And then for about two summers we didn't go back." It seems, though, that Dr. Burgess changed his mind or he got out-voted and the congregation started meeting a Briarpatch again for the summer services.

Other dangers threatened the old church, though, as for an example, the possibility of the Waleska Methodists building a permanent church building. Ironically, it was Dr. Burgess who saved Briarpatch from this danger. It seems that R.M. Moore traded some land to Rev. Reynolds Green (the land where the Waleska Baptist Church now stands) to build a church on. Dr. Burgess disagreed with Rev. Green and he told Dr. Moore to let the Baptists have it. Later, before he left, Rev. Green said, "Sometime we'll have a Methodist Church here, but it may be after I'm gone."

Fortunately, Briarpatch Church has withstood all these dangers, and the college and private citizens keep it in good repair for summer use.

Today, Briarpatch Methodist Church is a little, white, one-room building standing on highway 140 right outside the Waleska city limits. The old Waleska Highway is a tree-covered trail in the woods. The cemetery sits on the hill overlooking the church, and many of its gravestones are illegible. Inside the church the rough plank pews sit facing a small pulpit, an old pot-bellied heating stove stands in the corner. What is it about the church that makes it something different from an old, time-worn building? History. As one senior citizen put

it, “I guess you could tell it and notice the difference in the preaching, and the service, even the singing. Seemed like, course it might have been just my way of thinking, but seemed like people enjoyed it better, you know, and felt a little different out there in the Old Church, cause its been a church so long.”

The future looks bleak for Briarpatch. When Waleska Methodist Church builds its own church, what will happen to Briarpatch? The future of the old church is in the hands of the Methodist congregation.

Without Briarpatch Church, a colorful chapter in the history of Cherokee County would have been lost. This little one-room building, as the first Methodist Church in Cherokee County, brought the Methodists together and combined their efforts to develop and encourage the growth of Methodism in Cherokee County.