

Foot-washing Day at Crooked Oak by Wayne Easter as posted on Facebook:

Crooked Oak Primitive Baptist Church (established July 1878) still stands on Pine Ridge Road in northwest Surry County, North Carolina: on the right side of the road going south. The official name is Zion Hill, but us locals call it “Crooked Oak.” The white frame building has three windows on each side, a tin roof and two out-houses out back: a “His” and a “Hers.” In the times I remember, it was as hot as Hades inside the church in summer and as cold as the North Pole in winter, even with a wood heater going full-blast.

The annual Foot-washing Day came on the fourth Sunday in July: the high social event of summer and the best time of the year to meet all the neighbors, who hadn’t seen each other since the last Foot-washing or the last funeral. It was also the one day of the year when everybody went to church: including Pa, Mama and us boys. (So much for those who said we never went to church.) The meeting gave everybody a hard-earned break from the un-ending grind of tending crops in the hot summer sun. Everybody looked forward to getting together and sharing huge backlogs of gossip, jokes and news.

On Foot-washing Day, everybody from everywhere came to little white church beside Pine Ridge Road. From Scryptown, Garbraley, Flower Gap, Lambsburg, Pine Ridge, Round Peak, Beulah and Low Gap they came: along the hot dusty roads, riding in “A”-Models, “T”-Models, and newer models. By farm wagon, buggy, horseback, muleback, bicycle and on foot they came; all wearing their very best “Sunday-go-to-meeting” clothes.

The kids and dogs chased each other in the dirt and dust until all were the same color; the color of dirt. The women wore ankle-length dresses, home-made slatted cardboard sunbonnets and fanned themselves with cardboard fans from the funeral home. They bragged on their own families, their gardens, how many cans of green beans they had “put up” and gossiped about the women not there.

The men wore brand new bib overalls, with wind-up watches in the bib pockets, “chewed ‘baccer, dipped snuff and smoked “roll your own” cigarettes from small sacks of Golden Grain “store-bought ‘baccer.” Anyone who had no money, smoked their own “home-grown ‘baccer” from Golden Grain sacks and nobody knew.

Some of the best farming of the year was done right there under the shade trees on Foot-washing Day. With a cloud of tobacco smoke in the air and a sea of tobacco juice on the ground, the men traded guns, knives, horses, mules, cows and talked about the good old days. The more they talked about them, the better they became. The discussions never ended about whose horse could out-pull whose mule and whose could run the fastest. “My mule can smell rain coming and your horse can’t.”

To a man, everybody had the best d... coon or fox hound “ever put on God’s Green Earth.” “Why, my Ol’ Blue treed a coon one time and clomb right up the tree after it. That ol’ coon come tumblin’ down scared half to death and seein’ Ol’ Blue up in that tree scared me.

On a Foot-washing Day to remember, a red-headed girl from the village of Lamsburg came dressed up as a cow-girl: complete with cowboy hat and two guns on her gun-belt. She was an instant hit with every man and if prizes had been given that day, she would have won by a landslide. Even without a horse, she had everybody’s attention and even I was impressed, because I had never seen a real live cow-girl. (Most of the women were NOT impressed.

Zion Hill Cemetery was located just across the road, with a wooded area just beyond. Some men sampled moonshine they had hidden there. As the day went on, they became experts on everything under the sun. Their fields of corn and tobacco became bigger and better and some almost became millionaires right there under the trees. Some who drank too much “took a little nap”, while their wives threatened to “burn them woods and everybody in there.”

Every Foot-washing Day, Frank Coalson parked his Dodge pickup under the shade trees and sold cones of ice cream and cups of lemonade from a brand-new number two wash tub that had a chunk of ice floating around in it. According to my Pa, Frank’s lemonade was “Made in the shade, stirred with a spade and the best lemonade ever made.” I agreed and believed I could have “put away” the whole thing.

Except for the lemonade and ice cream, I’d had nothing to eat since breakfast and could hardly wait ‘til “eatin’ time.” The preaching, praying, singing and foot-washing went on forever and here I was about to starve to death. “All that stuff’s a waste of time and they oughta’ washed their feet at home like I had to do last night after wadin’ them mud holes. At least if I died right there, the cemetery was just across the street.”

Every time they sang, my Grandma Easter sang higher and louder than anybody else and during one song (when she hit a high note) somebody’s dog howled. Then all the kids howled, then everybody laughed. Grandma? She did NOT miss a note.

Finally, at long last, the meeting came to an end, just as I was getting ready to meet my Maker. Every family had brought food from home and the long tables (covered with white sheets) were loaded with more good stuff to eat than I’d ever seen. There were pies and cakes as far as the eye could see and it looked like every chicken in the country had been fried and brought there, which told me there were some tired people there. Our chickens back home ran free and when we needed one to eat, we had to chase it down, which sometimes took the whole family and the dog. We never failed.

For most kids, (like me) it was the biggest and best meal of the year and nobody cared who ate how much. It was a long time until next year, so I took no chances and dived in. No way was I going back home hungry. It had been a slow day until the eating began, then the sun raced across the sky and all of a sudden, all the food was gone, all the big tales had been told and everybody headed for home. It was the end of a perfect day, but a sad time, because Foot-washing Days at Crooked Oak Church were special and should last forever.

In the photograph: Crooked Oak Primitive Baptist Church in April, 2019.