

The Matecumbe Methodist Church

by JEAN U. GUERRY*

Only the imagination can tell us of the religious services held by the first Christian settlers on upper Matecumbe Key.

If anything was ever written about them, those records lie at the bottom of the sea, washed by ten thousand tides, and lost forever to the eye of man. Furthermore, the memories of all who might tell us the tales of those beginnings have been wiped clean by that false conqueror, Death.

But, knowledge of their Bahamian origin and of the traditions passed down would indicate that long before they had a church building or even an organized "society" these rugged colonists met for informal worship, prayer and hymn singing in private homes. And perhaps, even as the first homes were being built, they occasionally paused to worship under a shady mahogany tree. In any case, there is really no point in time when the Church was "started" in the upper keys; it was brought here, already alive and healthy, and only grew and developed in the hearts and lives of these noble pioneers.

There is no question but that the first services held by these settlers were Methodist in nature. This we know because the people had come from the Bahamas where the Methodist church was the stronghold of faith. Testimony is given to this by G. G. Smith in his HISTORY OF METHODISM IN GEORGIA AND FLORIDA. Telling of the appointment of the first pastor to Key West, January 17, 1844, he adds the comment: "Quite a colony of Wesleyans from the Bahamas had settled there [Key West]. . . The type of Methodism on the island is said to be more thoroughly Wesleyan than perhaps in any other charge of the Southern Church." The rolls of Methodist Churches in the Bahamas still today contain all the Conch names associated with the Keys area.

It seems the first "fact" we can lay our hands on is the one found in many sources that tells of two ministers, Sonelian and Giddens, who traveled up and down the keys from Key West by schooner, holding services wherever they could find enough people to call a congregation. These men began their itinerant ministry in 1881 and continued it until the Florida Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, began ap-

*Reverend Guerry was the pastor of Matecumbe Methodist when he prepared this article. He has since been transferred to Lakeview Methodist in Miami.

pointing regular ministers to serve the Upper Keys. The first such appointment was made in 1887 when the Conference sent the Rev. J. M. Sweat to be the pastor of the newly organized Key Largo Circuit.

Mr. Sweat's circuit was considerably smaller than that of Sonelian and Giddens, containing only four "organized societies," two of them with churches—Newport, which had been built in 1885, and Barnett's Chapel (Tavernier) which had been erected a year later. Sweat's schedule was to preach at Basin Hills on the first Sunday in the month and to remain there the following week working among the people. On the second Sunday he moved, by boat, to Newport, following in the same routine there. The third Sunday found him at Tavernier and the fourth at Matecumbe (known then as Matecumbia).

From 1888 until 1916 the Key Largo Circuit was changed almost annually to meet the particular needs current at the time the conference met. Various members and combinations of churches were organized which included appointments all the way from Coconut Grove to Pigeon Key and occasionally as far south as Key West itself!

It was during this period of shifting that the first Church was built on Upper Matecumbe Key—the child of a deathbed promise. In 1894 Preston Pinder led in the construction of a little frame church building on the ocean at the site of the present Golden Acres Trailer Park. He fulfilled the desire of his grandfather, Richard Pinder, who had made this dream known several years earlier as he lay dying.

The congregation that worshipped each Sunday in the little church came not only from Upper, but also from Lower Matecumbe, Windley (then called Umbrella) and Plantation Keys. Many people traveled several miles, usually by rowboat or sailboat, to answer the call of the bell that rang from the tower out across the water each week. Services were held EVERY Sunday, for when the regular pastor was serving the rest of his circuit, services were conducted at Matecumbe by laymen, most often Preston Pinder or Johnny Russell. These two men, being concerned about the spiritual life of the rest of the Conchs frequently traveled to other keys to conduct worship or Sunday School classes. This, in a sense, made Matecumbe the hub of all religious activities in the region.

Sometime toward the close of the first decade of the twentieth century, it was decided to move the little church to a more central location. This was a monumental task! Two large rafts were found and lashed together. During flood tide they were brought up on the beach as far as possible. Then, while the tides were changing, the building was rolled down to the

water's edge and placed on the raft. When the tide came up again the raft set sail with its precious cargo, and the House of God was moved to its new location, an act reminiscent of the bearing of the Ark of the Covenant by the Hebrews to a new spot in a land flowing with milk and honey.

The new setting for the church had been carefully chosen. It came to rest in a grove of buttonwood and palm trees on property that is now owned by the Cheeca Lodge. Not long after, it was decided to establish a church cemetery. As was the custom in those days, a spot right next to the church was chosen, and now this place became more sacred and revered because it contained all that was left of the mortal bodies of loved ones.

About this time, the Flagler Railroad became a reality and the circuit riders of the keys furled their sails, shipped their oars and began making their rounds on the "iron horse" rather than horseback as most of their other frontier counterparts did. "Uncle Johnny" Watkins, a Key West Conch, a devout and holy man, and probably the most beloved of all preachers to serve the area, was now the pastor of Matecumbe. His concern for the spiritual growth and needs of the people prompted the Florida Conference on several occasions to make special gifts to the keys churches and to be more charged in their concern for these Christian brethren of the islands. Circuits were divided as often as possible and more preachers sent to the keys.

Yet there was still a problem in obtaining ministers for special occasions that occurred when it was not the regular pastor's time to be in the area. Thus it was when Florence Pinder and Alonzo Cothron decided to be married, they had to "import" a preacher from Key West. But this they did, and on June 9, 1926, the Rev. L. Munro came from Key West to perform the first wedding held in the Matecumbe Methodist Church.

With more people now discovering the charm of America's "South Sea Islands" the population was being expanded by more than just the birth-rate. In 1933, thirty seven persons were received into the church on Profession of Faith, and fourteen were received by transfer, boosting the total membership to ninety-two. A regular pattern of growth was established in the little congregation for a few years until the records of 1936 reflect the terrible tragedy that befell what had now become the town of Islamorada.

The membership stood at 112 when the Florida Annual Conference met in June of 1935 and sent the Rev. R. E. Carlson to be the new pastor of the Matecumbe Circuit. But the JOURNAL of 1936 gives a membership of forty nine, an awesome reminder of the infamous '35 hurricane

that claimed the lives of the new pastor and his wife along with hundreds of others.

This same hurricane destroyed the lovely little frame church that had been so carefully built and maintained by the people. The only trace of it was found months later when a group of fishermen discovered the church bell high and dry on Rabbit Key, some eleven miles from where it began its gruesome journey. The bell was hung in a buttonwood tree where it stayed for some time, but eventually someone removed it and the fate and location of that long-loved instrument is still unknown.

The brave remnant of the '35 horror struggled back to its feet and as they rebuilt their homes, their community and their lives they rebuilt their church, choosing now a site on higher ground close to what had been the railroad and is now the roadbed for U.S.1 highway.

A small concrete block sanctuary was constructed with the parsonage next to it. The church began to experience the growth that hit the entire area after the "hurricane scare" wore off. In 1946 Matecumbe Church was set up to share its pastor with only one other church—Marathon. Two years later, under the careful guidance of Donald ("Deac") Weist, the church was strong enough to move out on its own, and the Conference of 1948 sent the Rev. W. E. Nelson to be the first full-time pastor of the Matecumbe Methodist Church.

America's "fabulous fifties" was felt as keenly in the Florida keys as it was anywhere in the country. The new church building was less than twenty years old when the congregation realized it was totally inadequate to meet the challenge of the new day that had dawned in Islamorada. Even the addition of a Sunday School annex was insufficient to meet the press of growth, so, in the tradition of their forefathers of 1894 and 1937, the people got together and launched a campaign for a new building. The result was the beautiful sanctuary that now stands on U.S. 1.

The little building that served so nobly during the days of rapid growth under the ministry of the Rev. E. S. Kerrick was now no longer needed by the Methodists. Since a small group of people had organized a Baptist Chapel in Islamorada, it was given to them and goes on still today serving as the sanctuary for the First Baptist Church of Islamorada.

With a new sanctuary and a new Sunday school building, the need now became apparent for a new parsonage. Construction began on a beautiful four bedroom house, and though Hurricane Donna in 1960 hurled her savage fury at the half-completed structure, the work went on and the minister and family moved into the new pastoral home in 1961.

The Providence of God stepped in again in 1964 when more room was desperately needed; a small building that sat next to the church annex became available for purchase. With this acquisition the church became the possessor of an entire block of land except for one small corner containing the "Hurricane Monument."

The church today offers many ministries and programs both for members and visitors. In recent years they have offered professional dramatic and choral groups a place to perform for the entire community. A summer youth program and youth center with its own full-time director has begun to be operated. Its Crusader Choir, composed of children and youth from the second through the ninth grades, has presented programs and concerts not only of sacred music but of secular music as well, becoming a program source for civic clubs and motels.

This choir prepared and presented a program on the history of the church last year in connection with an anniversary celebration commemorating the building of the first church, seventy-five years ago.