

Mt. Sylvia Church

Mount Pleasant, TX
(Titus County)

33°17.736' N

94°56.381' W

Organized 1882

First pastor William Harry Coldicutt

Current pastor Michael D. Thompson

A history of Mount Sylvia Missionary Baptist Church rightly begins with the ministry of Jesus Christ, that started shortly after his baptism, with the calling out of disciples along the Sea of Galilee, some 2000 years ago. Baptists have historically believed that modern Bible believing Baptist churches are the direct descendants of the churches which Jesus and his disciples established. Long before the day of Pentecost, Jesus was sending his disciples out to every village of Israel preaching the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Before the day of Pentecost, there was a fully functioning church numbering about 120 souls, meeting in Jerusalem transacting an election of a replacement apostle. As Saul began persecuting the churches, he is described as going from town to town with letters authorizing him to arrest those early Baptist folk.

In those early days, they were not called “Baptist” but were practicing the historic Baptist faith. A Baptist church, following the Biblical order, is by definition, a group of scripturally baptized believers who are covenanted together to carry out the work that Jesus left his church to do. The work, simply stated, is to make disciples throughout the world, to baptize those disciples and to teach them to observe all the things that Jesus taught his disciples (Matt. 28:19-20). In that great tradition, in the early 1880s, a circuit preacher rode his horse into the Mt. Sylvia community and began to preach.

This preacher was William Harry Coldicutt. In the year 1844 in Wilshire County, England, during the reign of Queen Victoria, he was born. At an early age he set out for the frontier of the United States. He arrived by sea in Detroit, Michigan, and soon made his way to northwest Louisiana. According to an early Coldicutt Bible record in the possession of his great granddaughter,



ca. 1950



current buildings

Jan Homer, he found his young bride in the rural area of Claiborne Parish. She was the daughter of W. B. Stevenson who was born in Arkansas around 1810. Francis Abigail was born "near Terryville" March 30, 1845. William and Frances married "near Montgomery." They remained in Louisiana until after the birth of their oldest daughter, Mary Lilian. "It is recorded that he received U. S. Citizenship papers at Mt. Pleasant on June 29, 1878, at the age of 34. Many of our congregation are direct descendants; Raymond Brownlee and his family, Thomas McKelvey and his family, and the closest relative, Tennie Cox, and her family." Corey, Kaci and Molly Homer, the grandchildren of Jan and Odis Homer, make the seventh generation of the descendants of Bro. Coldicutt and his wife, Francis, to be members of Mt. Sylvania Church.

The early history of the area is full of tales of the widows and fatherless. Bro. Coldicutt died at the age of 53 in the winter of 1897. The 1900 US Census for Titus County shows all of his children married except the youngest daughter, May, who was 11. His widow and May were living between two of the Huckaby brothers, farmers living somewhere east of Mt. Sylvania, probably nearer to Argo or Liberty Hill. Rufus was the oldest at 30 years old. Rufus had in his household, his wife Emma, his 20 year old sister, Della, and 3 children ranging in age from 6 to 2. John, the other Huckaby brother, was 27 and within the year in which the census was taken, had married Effie, May Coldicutt's older sister, who was only 16.

By the time of the 1910 census Francis Coldicutt, still listed as a widow, was listed in the household of the famous doctor, Thomas Riddle. Dr. Riddle, age 52, had 3 sons by his previous marriage, still living at home. The oldest one was 20 and the youngest was 8. A few years prior, May Coldicutt had become Dr. Riddle's young bride and by 1910 had given birth to two children. Only one had survived. She was 5 months old and her name was Gracie.

This same census record also shows one of her older daughters, Sarah Elizabeth, was already a widow at age 30. The young Bessie Coldicutt was a continuing presence in the early development of Mt. Sylvania. She had married her husband prior to the birth of their

first son, William Luther, in August, 1888. Her husband, William J. Brownlee, was part of a clan of Mississippi boys who arrived in Titus County from Tippah County, Mississippi.

Bessie was one of three girls who told of taking turns riding on the horse with their father to Mt. Sylvania for Sunday preaching. If this preaching started in 1882 as has come to be accepted, Bessie was 12. Bessie's older sister, Mary Lilian would have been 14 and Minnie Ann would have been 10. Effie, her baby sister, would have been only 2 years old. Effie was born after the census taker came by in 1880 as she is not listed on the 1880 Census.

There was also a son in the family in 1880. His name was Joe. His granddaughter, Mary Mayfield, was in attendance when the 1982 history was presented to the church and was interviewed in 2006 for the writing of this history. William Howard Coldicutt, another son, was born August 30, 1886, but he died at the age of 9 on July 17, 1895.

May Coldicutt was the youngest of the Coldicutt children born in 1889. The 1982 history of the church identifies her as "Mrs. May Riddle Jones, who will be 87 years old in February, 1976." She is quoted as saying, "her father, Bro. W. H. Coldicutt, organized the church. They first had services under some oak trees in the summer time. Also, they had church in the school building, and that W. P. McLean gave the land for the school; (and church)." She also says that, her brother-in-law, "Tom Hammonds, taught her here in 1912, and she was 12 years of age, and they had church."

It has been speculated whether Bro. Coldicutt came to Texas preaching or whether he was the product of those who were working hard in the ministry here in Titus County. In an article written by an early resident of Cookville and included in the Russell history the story is told of the preaching of Solomon Hays Price and D. C. (Dave) Myers.

And J. S. Sutherland, Postmaster and Justice of the Peace in his small store; and B. B. Garrett lived 1 mile South of town and had a grocery store; large family, one son an attorney in Fort Worth. It was his pond that my brother and I stuck our feet in the mud and

were baptized. Then D. C. (Dave) Myers, Northeast of town, and Sol Price, South toward Snow Hill, both farmers, preached forceful sermons in the Baptist church from the Scriptures and from the heart, without notes and without pay.

This was written by Reuben R. R. Cook, the son of Andrew Barney Cook. Reuben Cook was living in El Paso, Texas in December 26, 1963 when he wrote this account. Another article in the Russell history calls Sol Price the "Dean of East Texas Preachers." Another account reads, "Some of the stalwarts of the early Baptist churches were Bro. Sol Price, Bro. Peter Rogers and Parson Coley. I do not know why he was called Parson and the others "Brother"." All of these men are listed as either the moderator or preachers at early annual meetings of the Hopewell Baptist Association, which held its first annual session in 1880. Bro. W. H. Coldicutt was the moderator in 1882.

Bessie Coldicutt Brownlee with her other sons and a grandson sold their interest in a 20 acre tract, known as the Brownlee home place, to her son-in-law, Richard Cox, in the early 1940s. Bro. Peter Rogers performed the wedding for Richard and Tennie Cox. He was not the pastor of Mt. Sylvia at the time. They were married on a hillside near Gladewater Church where they located Bro. Rogers, October 20, 1923, the day they decided to be married. Tennie was Bessie's youngest daughter. The fact that Bessie was in possession of this property, free and clear of indebtedness, gives evidence that she and her children were next door to the meeting house from the earliest history of the Mt. Sylvia Community until her death in 1943. There is also a story of a tornado that struck her house. Her son, Lee, who was also living there, escaped injury because he went into another part of the house to unplug the phone. Richard and Tennie Cox provided for Bessie's welfare in her senior years.

Other families that were around before 1900 include the Holcombs, Allens and Cargiles. Grover Holcomb is listed on, not the first contribution list, but a subsequent one and is on official church rolls until he and his wife Dora were granted letters to move

their membership on June 14, 1959. R. B. Cargile and L. M. Cargile, listed on the list below, were also on the 1900 Census of the area along with W. T. and B. B. Hammond. Hattie Allen, the first name on the oldest official church roll was living in a rented house next door to Rufus Crooks in 1910. She was a sister-in-law to P. H. Rogers' wife.

Mrs. Eula Aaron Hammonds who lived in the community until 1903 tells us that she does not remember when a church was organized but she remembers that a Methodist Circuit Rider came by and preached occasionally and the Baptist had preaching sometimes too. She says the women of the community met and organized a Sunday School about 1900.

There are no official records of the church before 1912, but Mr. Charley Driggers can remember going to Mt. Sylvia Church in 1905. The oldest living member in 1982, Joe McKelvey, remembers attending church 97 years ago in 1910 when P. H. Rogers was the pastor. The Holcombs first came to Mt. Sylvia prior to 1900. The 1982 history also recounts that "the McKelveys remember that there was Baptist preaching in the school house once a month."

However, Tex Lilly recalled, that as a child, he remembered Madison McKelvey saying that he was the only remaining charter member, indicating the official beginnings of the missionary Baptist church to be after his arrival in the community in 1907.

Exactly when Bro. P. H. Rogers began preaching at Mt. Sylvia is unknown. He was raised in the area now known as Midway. His obituary record in the Mt. Pleasant Daily News, September 9, 1929, is reproduced here.

In the year, 1912, B.F. Willson moved his family from Nevill's Chapel to Mt. Sylvia and was elected treasurer. Below is a transcribed copy of a document found by Tex Lilly in the personal journal of his grandfather, B. F. Willson. Mr. Willson was a blacksmith by trade and kept both his business and church records in this same journal. This document is a signed list of contributions

made toward the purchase of the school house for the church. A transcript of that list is below:

“Wee the under sined a gree to pay the a mount opposit our names for the purpos of buying Mt Silvy School house and land for a missionary Baptist Church”

As has already been indicated, many believe that at least regular preaching and probably a group functioning as a church, were already using this location prior to that legal transaction. What prompted this transaction is unknown, but Willson’s background in a missionary Baptist church and the national and state movements of the Landmarkers, led to this clear statement of Mt. Sylvia being a “Missionary Baptist Church.”

Another possible explanation of the sale of the property from R. W. Crooks is revealed in a very complicated set of land transactions that took place because of the death of one, W. Y. Crooks. As was stated by Mrs. May Riddle Jones, it seems likely that a lawyer, W. P. McLean, gave the property to the community for school and church purposes. The property including the surrounding 1107 acres had been deeded to Margaret J. McLean, W. P. McLean’s wife, on June 17, 1862. W. P. McLean sold this property to P. W. Fennell who in turn sold it to W. Y. Crooks. An affidavit filed October 5, 1938 in the court, by I. H. Hammond, records Rufus Crooks moving to the area 25 years before. The property described in the affidavit is the property immediately south of the church’s two acres. Thus Rufus Crooks seems to have come into possession of the land at the death of W. Y. Crooks and this transaction to sell it to the community was mostly intended to provide the members of the Baptist congregation with a clear title to this land and building.

As no official church roll is available for this period, this contribution list is the next best thing. It is possible that some who signed were not official members, but the likelihood that they were members is great. P. H. Rogers is listed among the contributors.

“Ben Willson kept accurate records during the 16 years he was treasurer from 1912 to 1928. I’m sure you will enjoy the facts to follow as much as I did. Mr. Willson had a receipt for payments for the Mt. Sylvia School house and 2 acres of land made to R. W.

Crooks dated December 23, 1912.” Tex Lilly provided the copy below:

The land was purchased by donations from 50¢ to \$1. There was one generous contribution of five whole dollars. The Hopewell Association contributed \$4.15. Donations were also made to repair the building and to buy windows. To show you how valuable those 50¢ contributions were, Brother Willson purchased 100 2"x4"x14' for \$9.40. Just think how big this building might have been if it were not for inflation.

Archie Lilly, who married Carrie Willson, one of the younger daughters of B. F. Willson, served as treasurer for many years. His son, Tex Lilly, became the treasurer in 1970 and served in this office faithfully for 37 years until his death in 2007. In addition to his faithfulness in the office of treasurer, he also served as a deacon. He did much plumbing and carpenter work around the church, including much of the interior finish work for the family center that was constructed in 1995.

The following tribute to Tex’s father was written for the memorial dedication in 1994:

Mr. Archie Lilly, Tex’s father. Mr. Archie was a deacon, ordained by our church; A Sunday school teacher and a spiritual leader. I have always wanted to write a story about Mr. Archie. First, he was a Christian who lived so humbly; he served the Lord above all else. Tex won’t mind my remarks because they are all through precious memories. He was a man who was not in any way influenced by the world and its goods. He loved to read the Word of God and discuss it with his neighbors. He was not a man of means, as the world would view it, but, so rich in the kingdom of God. He was not a man of renown and didn’t strive to accumulate goods of this

world. Not well known in the society pages, but as God had planned it, Mr. Archie died of a heart attack while driving his little red car, causing it to wreck. Yes, the accident brought on front page coverage in the local paper with the county officials on hand to investigate the accident. I couldn't help but think the world just got to know who he was as he was leaving it. Mr. Archie, your memory will live forever in our hearts.

At the same memorial service Tex's mother, Carrie Lilly, was also remembered. Her tribute reads: "Mrs. Carrie Lilly, Tex's Mother. As we all at Mt. Sylvia can recall, Mrs. Carrie played the piano for us for many years. I can see her now as she struggled to walk to the piano each Sunday morning; Mrs. Carrie was crippled from childhood." Randy Homer, who played the piano by ear from sometime shortly after Carrie Lilly's passing until the turn of the 21st century, often said of his playing "that he was only playing it the way he had heard Ms. Carrie play it all those years." So Ms. Carrie's playing continued through Randy's gift for many more years.

Carrie Lilly is the first member of Mt. Sylvia whose official baptismal record remains. It is unknown who was baptized prior to the turn of the 20th century, but other early baptisms, include I. E. Driggers and his brothers Sam and Virgil.