

Church survives 121 years in spite of small

By JAN WATSON

TALLADEGA — The modest brick church on County 42 near Point Aquarius does not attract much attention.

Even the sign proclaiming its name, Salem Presbyterian Church, is a simple wooden structure with white lettering.

But the 37 members of Salem church are very aware of its existence and its history.

Salem Church was organized in 1858 as the Coosa Congregation of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, within the bounds of the Talladega Presbytery.

Some of its founding families were local people named Row, Hays, Vin-

cent, Sherrill, Carr, and Duncan. These people and their descendants have made up the main bulk of the Salem congregation over the years.

How has a church with such a small membership survived 121 years?

"Since God took care of it all this time, it must be useful. I believe that's the reason the church is strong and going today," says Milton Sherrill, an elder in the church who also serves as clerk of the session.

The congregation of Salem Church is "mostly older folks," and recently they have expressed concern about the church dying out.

"Our biggest problem is attracting young people," said Sherrill. "We lose a lot to bigger churches. We can't

compete with the bigger churches as far as Sunday schools and such," he said.

"We were just about to give it up when we started getting people from the lake (Logan Martin)," Sherrill said.

"I think it's unique that this church has survived all these years with a membership so small," said Sherrill, adding he doubted if the church ever had more than 50 members at one time.

The most active days in Salem Church were during the depression. At that time, the building housed both a church and school on the 20 acres owned by the church. Sherrill's mother, Mrs. Leila M. Sherrill, attended that school.

Attempts were made to farm the acreage at that time, but "it was not very successful."

The first building eventually was replaced by a second one housing just the church, which stood several feet to the southeast from the present brick building erected in 1972.

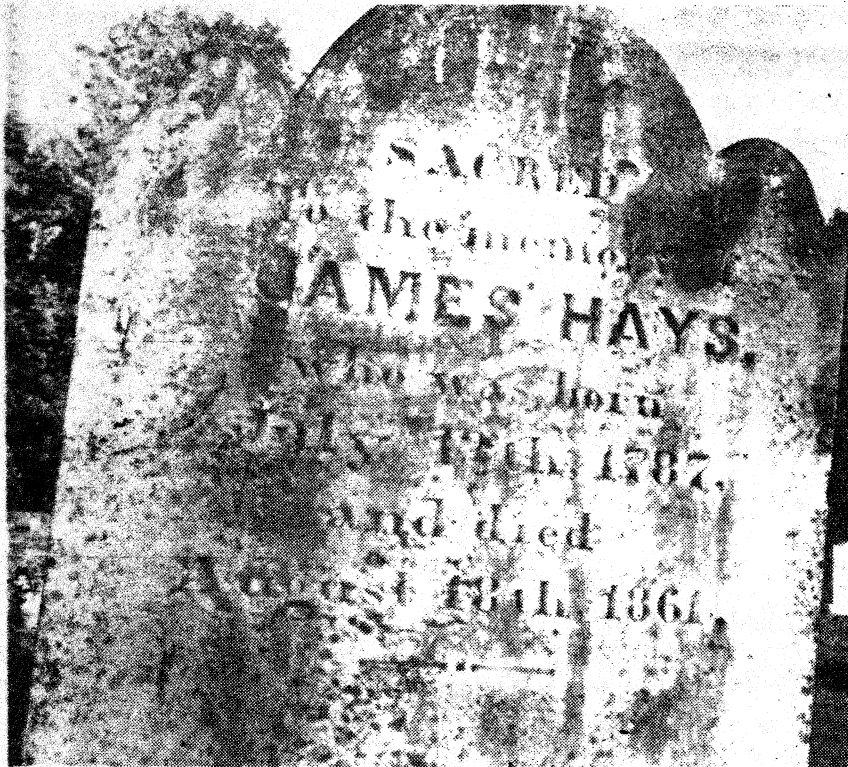
The site of the second building was commonly referred to as "rosinhill." As the story goes, the area around the second building was covered in yellow pines. One day a church member sat down on a stump near the building and got pine resin on his Sunday best hence the name "rosinhill."

"Some folks around here still know where Salem Church is. I always tell them it's the old rosinhill church, and they immediately know what I'm talking about," Sherrill said.

"The church is in unison now," said Sherrill, "but we've had our problems in the past, like any other church."

At one time, the Salem congregation split and a splinter church, Fairview Presbyterian Church, was formed "down the road." It no longer is in existence, but Salem Church is still going strong.

They recently completed a mission drive, which began as a challenge from Salem's full-time minister, the Rev. J. Curtis Hodgens, and his wife.



James Hays tombstone still may be seen in the Salem Presbyterian Church

graveyard. The church was organized in 1858.

membership

Rev. Hodgens and his wife donated \$100 and challenged the congregation to match it. The congregation not only matched it, they raised almost five times the amount with proceeds from a fish fry and yard sale held Oct. 6.

The church raised almost \$500, which they plan to donate to the hunger program. They want to channel the money to those less fortunate in Cambodia or use it to aid the Vietnamese boat people.

Salem Church is known for its generosity. It "has a reputation as being one of the highest givers" to charities.

"In spite of our small membership, we give quite a lot," Sherrill said.

They donate regularly to charities such as the Presbyterian Home for Children in Talladega.

Financially, the church is self supporting. They are not funded by the Birmingham Presbytery, as many small Presbyterian churches are.

"We pride ourselves on being self-sufficient," said Sherrill.

The present church has between 20 and 25 active members who worship in a building reminiscent of times past.

The polished hardwood floor of the church was reconstructed from the ceiling of the second church building. Stained-glass windows cast a warm glow over the paneled interior.

Each window, donated in memory of past members, bears a small plaque honoring such people as Reuben R. (Dude) Roe, Mr. and Mrs. Adolphus L. Vincent, Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Carr, Jack Carson and Dwight Carson, Clarence Mark Duncan and Perva E. Duncan.

The most ornate window, which illuminates the pulpit, bears a plaque honoring James Hays, one of the church founders.

What about the future of Salem Church?

"It doesn't look all that good," said Sherrill. "But we feel like the Lord will



One of the most ornate windows at Salem Presbyterian Church bears a plaque honoring James Hays, one of the church founders.