

EARLY HISTORY OF BON SECOUR

BY

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1885

My mother, Theresa Margaret Keller Miller came to Mobile, Alabama from Blumenthal, Germany when she was seventeen years of age. When she married and came to live in Bon Secour there was no church. Now and then an itinerant Temperance Preacher passed through and stirred up a semblance of religion. The Roman Catholic Church sent a priest once a year to baptise infants.

My mother believed in infant baptism, (since she was Lutheran) so she urged my aunt, Mrs. Anna Krudop who was a member of Trinity Church, to request Bishop Richard H. Wilmer through Rev. J. S. Johnson of Trinity to send a minister once a year to baptize the children, as the Roman Catholics did.

Bishop Wilmer sent Rev. Asa J. Roberts who saw the great need of a school in the community. He sent his daughter "Miss Sally" who was the first teacher. She boarded or lived with my mother and taught in a vacant house near by. She was paid \$8.00 a month. It was not easy going for a teacher, for many of the people resented the form and ceremony of the Episcopal Church which she represented. One day she came home crying and saying that some one had put a dead hog on her school steps and had labeled it, "For the teacher's lunch". She felt that she could not bear such an insult, but she did go on.

For some time the school was a Parochial School supported by its patrons. Then it became a Public School attended by both white and creole children. After a short time the Creoles were given a separate school.

The church and school were built side by side in 1885.

In order to raise funds for the church building, a boat excursion was given from Mobile. It was advertised as being given for benefit of St. Peters' Church. Some Catholics came for they felt that "St. Peter" belonged exclusively to them. On the return trip, they talked of the new church and the wonderful opportunity for the spread of their faith. My uncle, a Lutheran, who always liked to antagonize the Roman Catholics said, "But this St. Peters' Church belongs to the Episcopalians!" Imagine their chagrin!

The Roman Catholics built a church soon after that.

My mother kept the first Post Office and it was called "Theresa".

In 1886 I was baptized in St. Peters Church. (Mrs. J. E. Brown of Foley may have been the first baby baptized there.) The first Confirmation Class was confirmed in my home by Bishop Wilmer. The first Church wedding was that of Mr. James Allen and Miss Winnifred Johnson. I, though only a tot, remember that wedding and the lovely bride. (Archie Allen's father and mother)

The work of the school and church was closely interwoven. Two of the earliest teachers were Miss Adele Bright (Mrs. Starr) and Miss Amelia Schreiber (Sister of Mrs. J. C. Witt). Both did much to uplift the lives of the people in the community.

Three outstanding teachers were: Miss Laure Mc Namee, a member of St. Johns Church, Mobile, Miss Sophie Schreiber who married Mr. J. C. Witt, and Miss Augusta Martyn who added much to the efficiency of the church work and who did much to improve the way of life of the community. I taught the Witt School for four years.

Bon Secours' History and the Church History would not be complete

without telling of the devotion and faithfulness of "The Witt Family". "Miss Mary" almost always boarded the teachers, and the preachers always found a haven of rest and peace in her home. "Mr. Willie", though stone deaf, conducted Sunday School and was Lay Reader for many years. "Mr. Jimmy" (J. C.) was a faithful warden and also trustee of "Witt School". These brothers took turns about raising the Church Flag. (A ground of red with a white cross.) You see the minister had to travel by sail boat depending on wind and weather, and if he didn't arrive the flag was not raised. A belfry with bell was added to the church building and both were used—the flag calling to the River Folk, the bell ringing out its call to those who dwelt in the interior. Rev. Howard Walker drove down from Atmore with his horse and buggy once a month.

There are many families whose fore-fathers worshipped in the old "St. Peters by the Sea."

The Swift Consolidated School and the new St. Peters are still "side by side" working for the uplift of the community and the glory of God.

EDUCATION IN BON SECOUR

The first school in Bon Secour was a private school in the home of John Cook about 1840. John Cook's home stood near the spot where Mr. and Mrs. Walter Miller now live. A governess was hired to live in the home and teach the Cook children and anyone else who wished to attend. People lived so far apart with no way of traveling except by boat, horseback, horse and buggy, or walking, that only a very few children were able to come.

It is said that Walter Miller's father was one of the children who did attend. He would row a boat from Oyster Bay to where Patterson's store now stands, then walk to John Cook's home. He was able to attend school only one or two months a year and did not go past the second grade.

As the years passed several more private schools were started in other parts of Bon Secour. There was the Plash School in Oyster Bay and the Wenzel School, the Coburn School, the Creole School, the Swift Mill School, and the Witt School on this side of the river.

One of the teachers in the Coburn School was Miss Hattie Hallaway who taught for \$11.00 a month for three months a year.

The Witt School was the first public school in Bon Secour although to begin with it was a private school. It was started about 1887 by the people of St. Peter's Episcopal Church. Miss Sally Roberts, the Bishop's daughter, was the first teacher. Miss Roberts and several of the teachers who followed would board from house to house. She was paid by the parents of the children, often taking her pay in board.

The Witt School was made a public school when Mr. Lambert was Superintendent of Education in Baldwin County. It was maintained for thirty three years and had, in all, nineteen different teachers. The July storm of 1916 damaged the building so badly that it was decided not to make repairs and thus the Witt School was discontinued.

Located on the banks of the river, the Witt School was somewhat inaccessible at times. When a southwest wind came the tide would come up into the school house and the children would have to be rescued by boat. Since it was unhandy for many of the children to reach Mr. and Mrs. Charles Swift selected a spot about half way between the Witt School and the Wenzel School and started the Swift-Mill School. It was built directly across the road from the present site of the Swift Consolidated School and accommodated the Swift children and their neighbors as well as the children of the Mill workmen.

In 1917 the patrons of Swift-Mill school and Witt School decided to pool their efforts and materials, enlarge their school building, and have at least two teachers. The result was the building of the Swift Consolidated School. At a later date the Plash School at Oyster Bay decided to become a part of Swift Consolidated School also.

The history of the progress of the school parallels the history of the Parent-Teacher Association. Mr. and Mrs. S. A. Smith organized a "School Improvement Association" of which Mrs. Charles A. Swift was first president. This Association later became the P.T.A. Bon Secour is noted for its active P.T.A. The P.T.A. now had about sixty members and its officers are: President--Mr. George Kaiser, Vice-President--Mrs. Lloyd Allon, Secretary and Treasurer--Mrs. Marie Carver.

The P.T.A. has sponsored many fine projects for the school and it helps in all the school does. The project for this year is, "New Playground Equipment" and already more than three hundred dollars have been spent for swings and a sliding board.

During the last few years the P.T.A. has provided the classrooms with the most modern teaching equipment; such as, a slide projector, a 16 M.M. film projector, maps, globes, and supplies for the children to work with, such as paints, brushes, paper, aquariums, and science materials. The Association has spent hundreds of dollars for new library books and encyclopedias so that the children would have plenty of reading and reference materials.

During the last years of Mr. Tharp's term a beautiful modern auditorium and gymnasium combined was built on the campus. The P.T.A. provided it with a beautiful red velvet curtain and beige cyclorama. The auditorium has filled a long-felt need in the community. With its adequate stage and large seating capacity it is used more and more as the focal meeting place for all community activities.

At the beginning of our school lunchroom program the P.T.A. equipped the kitchen with all modern conveniences. It also bought for the school the first electric pump so that the kitchen could have running water, and installed butane gas for cooking.

Bon Secour is not only proud of its P.T.A. but of its very fine lunchroom. The lunchroom was started by Miss Bernice Miller and Mrs. Roy Holmes. They planned to have parents send canned and fresh vegetables and Mr. Childress gave soup bones. The teachers prepared soup and sold it for five cents a cup. The plan soon broadened and meals were served for ten cents. Now we have two efficient cafeteria workers, Mrs. Maudie Woodard and Mrs. Luby Cockrell who serve government approved meals with milk for twenty-five cents each.

When Swift-Mill School was re-built in 1917 it had a teacherage and only three classrooms. Later two more large classrooms and four bathrooms were added and the auditorium was built. Now Swift School is a place where children are comfortable and happy and where teachers are able to practice their philosophy of good teaching, which is concerned with the development of the whole child; his physical body, his alert mind, his emotional security, and his social well being. Credit for the school should be given to all the people of the past who have worked so hard to make the school what it is, to the trustees of the present, Thomas Steele, George Kaiser, and Preston Fulford; to the P.T.A., to the children, to the teachers, but most of all to the principal, Mrs. Swift, because "As is the principal, so is the school".

Marie Carver