

Center Methodist Church

My hope is that each of you had a wonderful Thanksgiving. I could have a good Thanksgiving and not think about writing this article the entire weekend; I've chosen to write a short one this week. It will be short because not much is known about Center Methodist Church in Oakway. Yes I know, not many of you know where Oakway is. I didn't either until I drove through it, very quickly. Center Methodist is located at 6645 West Oakway Hwy. (SC 24) in Oconee County, south east of Westminster. Do you know where I am now?

Since I first saw Center Methodist on October 15, 2004, I have been able to obtain a couple of printed documents pertaining to its history. Most of what I know about this little building was told to me by a person that experienced its growth and decline firsthand. The printed documents simply confirmed what I was told. The delightful person that I was fortunate to meet that beautiful fall day in 2004 is "The Story of Center Methodist Church".

I was not looking for Center Methodist that fall day, I was driving from point A to point B, looking at the beautiful fall foliage of upstate South Carolina. Even when I saw it, I didn't know what I was seeing. There was no church sign, no steeple with a cross, just a few tombstones behind the building that could be seen from the highway. That was the only hint that this little 30 ft. by 44 ft. white lap siding building sitting on top of a red clay hill in a grove of hickory trees could possibly be a church.

Feeling rather sure of the possibility that it could be a church, I turned around and went back. As I parked, I saw a lady raking leaves in the front yard of the house across the road. When we made eye contact, she waved and I waved, at which time she began walking towards me. The closer she got to me I could tell that she was an elderly lady, possibly wondering what I was doing. When we greeted each other, I sensed very quickly that I was in the presence of someone special, a sweet lady. I took my hat off, introduced myself, told her what I was doing and asked her if this building was a church.

From this point, 89 year old Zelma Mason took over the conversation. She asked if I would like to go in the building. Of course, I said yes. She shuffled back across the highway to retrieve the key. When we went in, everything was there: the pews, the pulpit and the pot belly stove. We sat on a pew and Miss Zelma began to tell me the story of Center Methodist. I don't know who enjoyed our

time together more, Miss Zelma or me. It was a rewarding day that I'll never forget.

Some of her exact dates were a little uncertain, remember Miss Zelma is 89 years old, born in 1915. Between the printed information that I've found and the fact that Miss Zelma has lived across from the church with her blind twin sister, Thelma, since birth; this is what I've learned about Center Methodist. The first mention of a church in the Center Community is noted in the Pickens Circuit records, dated August 8, 1851. There is no mention of a building, but as a "camp meeting under a brush arbor". Miss Zelma has been told that the building we were sitting in was built sometime between 1860 and 1870.

In 1878 Center Church was transferred to the Townville Circuit with a membership of 81 and a building valued at \$200. Miss Zelma told me that the church was well maintained and the congregation grew until 1934. That was a pivotal year for the Center Church. A week-long tent revival service was held in the neighboring community of Townville. She said after that, Center Church was never the same. All of the Center Church members moved to the new church in Townville and the Center Church closed, never to hold a regular service there again.

There is a record of a reunion service being held there on July 30, 1944. After that the church fell silent again. When the building began to fall into disrepair and conversation circulated that the building might be torn down, the Mason sisters put \$1,000 of their money along with \$4,000 that they raised to repair the building's windows, roof and siding. Miss Zelma told me, "I didn't want the families of the folks buried here not to have a church building beside their loved ones." They did this because they loved the little church building across the highway from their house. Keep in mind, the Masons were never members of Center Church, they were members of Bethel Baptist Church.

In 2009, the United Methodist Conference of South Carolina donated Center Church to the Oconee Heritage Center. When work began to repair Center again, at the age of 94, Zelma and Thelma were there to "supervise" from their front porch. I was fortunate to be able to keep up with this work over the next four years as the Heritage Center readied the building for a Christmas service on December 24, 2013, the first service in 69 years. Christmas Eve is a busy time for everyone and Oakway is a long way from Hartsville, but this service was a "must be

there" for me. I couldn't think of a better place to be that year to celebrate the birth of Christ and the rebirth of Center Methodist Church.

At the age of 98, Miss Zelma was not able to attend this service due to declining health. She told me in 2004, as a child how pleasing it was to see the churchyard full of the members' horses and buggies. So, I have the peace of mind knowing that she must have been pleased to again see the parking lot full, this time with cars, from her bedroom window. If you happen to be in the area, or can see your way clear to attend the 11:00 AM service on December 24 at Center Church, you'll experience one of the best country Christmas services of your life. Unfortunately, Miss Zelma will not be there, she died peacefully on August 30, 2014 at the age of 99.

Bill Segars, November 23, 2015





