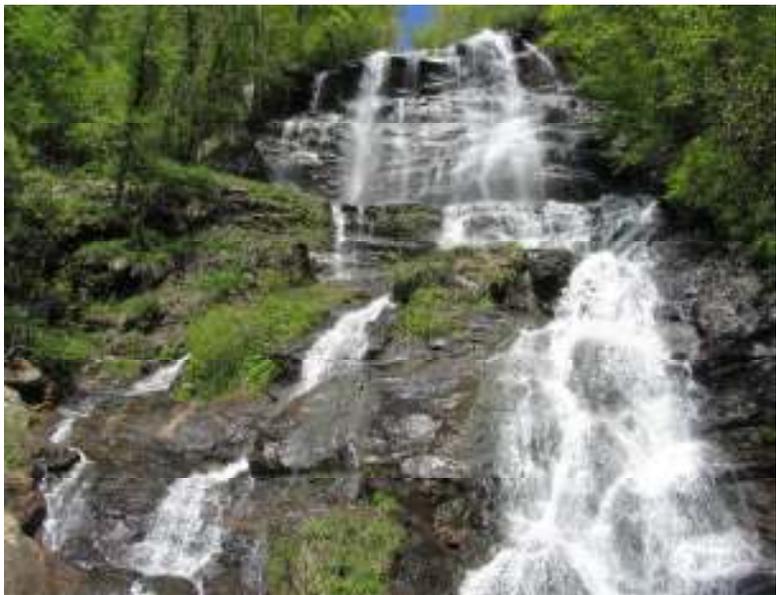


# The Little Church that Could – Part 1

Don & Diane Wells

Scattered across the Southern Appalachian Mountain area are a number of the early churches that had their beginning when pioneer families moved to Georgia after the Cherokee Indians were removed in 1838. Some of these families even moved into the area before the Cherokees left. In the mountain area of Dawson County, the little churches that began in the 1800's were Goshen Baptist Church, Nibblewill Baptist Church, Antioch Baptist Church and Pleasant Union Baptist Church just to name a few. These churches were built in the flat lands below the mountain peaks where small towns sprung up. But one church stands out among all others. It was the Old High Shoals Baptist Church located high in the mountains off the beaten path and "off the grid." This church was the "Little Church that Could."

Generally, families moved into an area that can be farmed and following closely on their move is the planting of a church to be a center for community life. But for Old High Shoals Baptist Church, things were different. Frosty Mountain is located about two miles north from the top of Amicalola Falls. It is an area of rugged mountainous terrain and not one that would seem to be selected as a place to set up a community. There was no flat land, no water from



**Amicalola Falls**

streams except in the valleys below the mountains and limited access roads. Winter in this over 4,000 foot elevation was harsh making it a less than desirable community location. But this is where the community of Buncombe (Bincomb) was established probably around the 1860's and became a placename for a short time in GA in 1883.

The earliest settler to the area may have been Abraham Cochran who it is believed settled near the foot of Cochran Falls in 1823 moving there from North Carolina. Cochran Falls is the east of where High Shoals is located. Some of Abraham's sons and their kin moved up onto the mountain above Cochran Falls and began the community that later became the location of High Shoals Church. It was originally called Buncombe, because the Cochran's came from

Buncombe, Ireland and had settled in Buncombe County, North Carolina before coming to Georgia. The Cochran's were Scotch-Irish. Like many other of this descent, they preferred to be far away from other people so they tended to live far into the hills. The Scotch-Irish were also accomplished "moonshiners"; thus, they tended to live away from the general public. A Scotch-Irish community might be what attracted the other early settlers to this area who were also of Scotch-Irish descent. One of these families was the McClure family.

Many of the McClure's arrived in the mountain region around 1874-5 coming from Macon County, NC (Franklin, NC) to get away from the "milk fever" epidemic that had occurred in Macon County. Milk fever is generally caused by cows feeding on White Snakeroot that is poisonous to cows and anyone who drinks milk from that cow. Ruben and Matilda McClure and their three sons, William Jasper, John Wesley and Thomas Asberry McClure were among the early McClure family to arrive at High Shoals. Both Ruben and William Jasper were licensed ministers. William arrived at High Shoals with three motherless children having lost his wife to milk fever. Millis Killian McClure also moved to the area of High Shoals and was probably the first McClure to arrive in Georgia. The Amicalola Mountains were once known as McClure Mountain named after Millis.

With the arrival of Ruben McClure and William Jasper McClure to the High Shoals area and both being licensed preachers, it was only a matter of time before the first church was erected at High Shoals. With the growth of the community on the mountain, the early settlers decided to build a church and a school. The church was organized on June 7, 1879 with the presbytery consisting of: Samuel Roper (Minister), Jonathan F.M. West (Deacon) and Samuel Harben (Deacon). The other men listed were: Henry Thomas (Deacon), William Crofford, Leander D. Foster, George Cochran, William P. Ingram, James Swancey, William J. McClure (Minister), and Ruben McClure (Minister). Samuel Roper, a founding father for High Shoals Baptist Church was also a founder for Pleasant Union Baptist Church on Steve Tate Road about five miles from High Shoals Church.

The original church and possibly the schoolhouse was a common log building with a dirt floor. There are no remains of this building but it is believed to have been located to the left of the High Shoals Church Road near where the open shed is currently located. Log cabins were the common buildings of the mountains. Ruben McClure and his wife were known to have built a log cabin when they arrived on the mountain but had to move in before it was finished due to winter conditions. It is said they had to keep a big fire going to keep the wild animals out.

The church was located on the western slope of Frosty Mountain. There were no utilities in the mountain so being off the grid makes operating a church or a school a challenge. Water was collected from a spring on Frosty Mountain and piped by gravity in a pipe almost a quarter mile to the church. Initially candles probably were used to provide light. Much later in the church's life and continuing today, propane camp lanterns provided lighting in the church and propane

heaters supplied heating for winter conditions. Bathrooms are an upscale outhouse, one for men and one for women.

The High Shoals Church and community thrived on the mountain well into the early 1900's. William Jasper McClure took over as pastor in later years and held the position until his death in 1919. William was known throughout the mountains as a great preacher who preached the "old time religion."

## **The Little Church that Could – Part 2**

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The community of Buncombe last appeared as a placename on a Georgia map in 1885 but the community did not disappear. Loss of a placename may have been associated with loss of a post office. The people of the High Shoals area continued surviving in the mountains scratching out a living in a poor farming area. Some of the homes sites can be located today along Anderson Creek which is about ½ mile to the west of High Shoals in a mountain plateau area. The old roads connecting the homes to the church and school can still be found today. Near the home sites are the remains of their old stills for making moonshine. Selling or trading of moonshine helped supplement the pioneer's income to be able to buy staples for their family's living.

In the late 1890's and into the early 1900's, things began to change on the mountain for the worse. The demand for lumber began to grow as more people wanted to build houses.

The Amicalola Mountain region was covered in large forests and the understory was rich in herbs and wildflowers. Many of these herbs and wildflowers had medicinal qualities and had a marketable value. Many of the people that lived on the mountains and the foothills harvested these plants every year which eventually devastated the species making many of them rare today. The plants harvested included ginseng, lady's slipper, pink root, mayapple, boneset, rosin root, yellowroot, golden seal and star grass.

Beginning in 1900, significant environment damage to the mountain region occurred with the deforestation of the mountain area. Major logging operations were established over the entire north Georgia area. The mountain region, for the most part, was stripped of many of its trees leaving a barren soil. It is assumed the location of the mountain communities were spared from this devastation but no data can be found to support this assumption. Reported in George Ward's, "The Annals of Upper Georgia Centered in Gilmer County", some of these trees (poplar) were giants towering to great heights with the first limb being 60-100 feet in the air. One tree was recorded to have produced 4,875 board feet of lumber.

After the trees were removed and with a damaged understory, erosional forces due to the heavy rains washed a lot of the soil into the lower elevations and silted up streams and rivers. It must have been a sorry sight to see. The damage caused to the water supply can only be imagined but it had to be significant and probably caused some families to move from the mountain area.

Although the pioneer families were mostly self-sufficient and immune from the greater economy, they never the less suffered under the depression of the late 1920's. Jobs for making ends meet were scarce and money to buy staples was in short supply. Some families no doubt gave up their mountain living and move to the valley in search of jobs to survive. It was at this time that the government stepped in and changed the lives of those left living in the mountains.

The Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) was formed soon after the economic disaster of 1929. Some of the divisions were moved to the mountain regions and put to work reforesting the mountain and building other structures to support economic recovery in the area. Soon after the CCC started, the government began purchasing sections of the mountain region for national



**High Shoals Baptist Church**

forests. With the purchase of these lands, the migration of the mountain people increased. The mountain became an unpopulated place in which the flora and fauna again flourished. The High Shoals Community held its last service at High Shoals Baptist Church on Sept. 22, 1934.

In 1940, the state government purchased the land around Amicalola Falls and it became a state park. The Oct. 6, 1940 issue of the Atlanta Journal reported that the state highway department was building new roads to the Amicalola Falls. Before the roads were built, only a rough footpath existed to the area of the falls.

From 1934 to well into the 1960's, High Shoals Church and the community surrounding it remained abandoned. In the 1960's, the Rev, Ardel McClure, the Rev Billy Welch and family and friends began visiting the old church site. On their first visit, they were unable to reach the church by car and had to hike a mile in on foot. The road was in very poor shape with a great deal of tree fall covering the it. When they got to the church site, the cemetery was covered in tree debris and brush and the church building was no longer there.

These descendants of the early settlers took it upon themselves to clean up the church cemetery and grounds and to clear the road. They began having annual homecomings at the church site led by the Rev Ardel McClure. In the early 1970's, they raised funding to build a shed as a place to have meetings on the church grounds. The Rev Billy Welch later took over from Ardel in the mid 1970's.

In 1975, Billy Welch and Lloyd (Flem) Vaughters, who was not a member of the church, decided to begin raising money to build a new church. The new High Shoals Church was completed in 1975 with the help of friends and relatives and services were begun again. They were held on the 3rd and 5th Sunday's with a small church community. The church has continued in operation since that time. The Rev. Billy Welch served as pastor until his death in 1987 when the Rev. Clarence Stanley took over. The church was reconstituted on 30 September 1989 and currently has about 60 families as members.

Against all odds, the High Shoals Baptist Church has survived and epitomizes the "Little Church that Could."