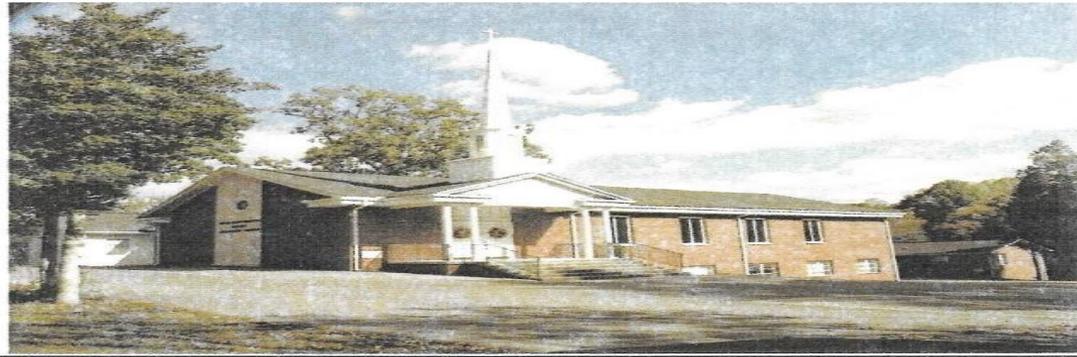


1796 - 2012



**A HISTORY OF MIDDLESETTLEMENTS  
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH**

Brenda Clemens, Researcher and Author

## A HISTORY OF MIDDLESETTLEMENTS UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

In attempting to write a church history, it is always difficult to decide where to begin. Of course, the real beginning for any Christian church must be traced back to the time of Jesus Christ. I keep remembering the words of that old hymn, "The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ the Lord." There can be no story on church histories or roots without the recognition that Jesus Christ must be the root, the source, the vine, and the foundation of any congregation of people who call themselves a church.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus told Peter, "Upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." Throughout the centuries, many forces (both without and within) have sought to weaken and destroy God's church. It endured severe persecutions by the Romans during those early years, the great schism where the western and eastern churches divided into the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox churches, the long conflict with the believers of Islam, the ill-advised Crusades, and the Protestant Reformation. These and many other events have often shaken the hierarchy of the church as well as the faith of Christian believers. Yet, the church has endured. Here we are today at Middlesettlements United Methodist Church serving as an example of one of the many churches lifting our voice in praise as we thank God for the Holy Spirit's sustaining power in leading and keeping us together through many, many years.

As we consider the origins of Middlesettlements, we should remind ourselves of the beginning of Methodism itself. Unlike many denominations, the Methodist movement began not as a church (John Wesley remained a priest in the Anglican Church

until his death.) but as small groups called "societies" which encouraged people to seek a relationship with Jesus Christ as a personal Savior. The first "Methodist" society was organized in London in 1739. Before that time, John Wesley, his younger brother, Charles, and George Whitefield formed a "holy club" at Oxford University where students met weekly to try to learn more about living a holy life. These societies grew rapidly and spread throughout England and Scotland. Eventually, the societies would become the Methodist church. John Wesley and his friends were thought to be so radical that they were excluded from preaching in most established churches. He decided that the good news should be preached wherever a group of people would listen, so he preached in fields, in entrances to mines, in a cemetery at Epworth using his father's tombstone as a pulpit, in cottages, and in churches whenever permitted. According to Stephen Tomkins in his book, *John Wesley: A Biography*, Wesley rode over 250,000 miles and preached more than 40,000 sermons in his lifetime. What a history of dedication to service we as Methodists have in our founder, John Wesley!

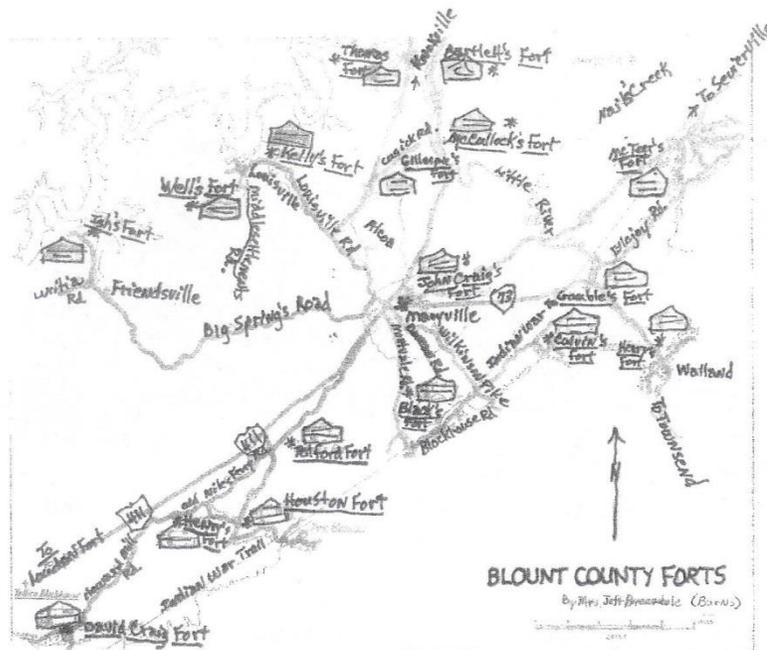
It should come as no surprise that the Methodist movement quickly spread to the American Colonies. Other churches (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Presbyterian, etc.) were already established in the New World; however, the Methodist movement came, as one writer said, "...sweeping along like the winds which God had let loose from His fist, swaying devout souls, and breaking down stubborn sinners." (Hudson) A group or movement that began with open-air preaching appealed greatly to the American frontiersmen. John Wesley appointed Thomas Coke (an ordained Anglican priest) to be the superintendent of the American Methodists. Coke, in turn, ordained Francis Asbury, and thus began the American Methodist Episcopal Church. Soon, campgrounds and sheds were filled with people coming to hear those early circuit riders as they spoke, out in the wilderness.

Although these were dangerous times for settlers, governing bodies were organized. William Blount was appointed territorial governor of this region in 1780, and the town of Maryville was established and named after his wife, Mary Grainger Blount. On May 31, 1785, the Treaty of Dumplin Creek was signed with the Cherokee Indians. In the treaty, the Cherokee agreed that all the lands on the south side of the French Broad and Holston Rivers would be open to white people. (Burns, p. 15) Of course, many of the Cherokee were angry because of the intrusion of the settlers. There are many stories of raids and bloodshed during that time. Many of these tales are connected to the area around what is now Middle settlements United Methodist Church. One of the pioneers in the region was a man named Abraham Wells. In August, 1793, Wells was killed by Indians, and his fortified cabin became known as Wells Station. Many feel this was an early name for the Middle settlements community. Another story which was passed down through the generations, tells of a time when Wells Station was under siege by the Cherokee. The men had gone out together to work in the fields. Before long, the water supply inside the fort ran out. Unable to endure the children's cries for water, one young mother slipped from the fort to go to a spring a short distance away to get water. She was captured and scalped on the spot. (The spring is reported to be just off what is now Louisville Road.) While the dangers were still there, large numbers of pioneers came by rivers and by trails into this area and began to clear land and build cabins.

It was inevitable that after the opening of the frontier to settlers in what is now Tennessee, Methodist circuit riders would soon follow. The first Methodist church within the bounds of what is now Tennessee was Acuff's Chapel, built in 1786, just outside of Kingsport, Tennessee. In that same year, two Presbyterian churches were established in Blount County – Eusebia, near what was then McTeer's Fort, and New Providence, near Craig's Fort. Methodists came to our region

shortly thereafter. The Holston circuit was established in 1783, and sometime after that, Reverend William Burke was assigned to this area. These circuit preachers would make the rounds of their "churches" on horseback and meet with groups of believers every five or six weeks. It must have been a tiring and difficult time for preachers. Reverend Burke wrote the following in his journal in 1792: "On my next round, the Cherokee War was just breaking out. After I crossed the French Broad and Little Rivers and arrived at the extreme part of the settlement, I found inhabitants in a state of alarm on account of the war.... I was obliged to travel under cover of night. I put my trust in God and set off." (Burns, p. 110) In those days, devoted servants of God must have felt a strong call to follow Christ when He said, "Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation." (Mark 16:15) Though not completely proven by records, it appears Reverend Burke met with a group of believers at what is now Middle settlements. This group soon wanted a true place to worship, and in 1796 (the same year that Tennessee was admitted to the Union) a log church was built at Fort Middle settlements.

The origin of the name "Middle settlements" is unclear. In all likelihood, Fort Middle settlements was named after one of the geographical divisions of the Cherokee Nation. Their divisions were known as: the Low Towns, the Overhill Towns, and the Middle settlements. It is also possible that Middle settlements was so named because it was midway between Fort Sanders and Fort Loudon. (These so called forts were simply strongly built cabins where settlers could go in the event of an attack by Indians.) At any rate, a log structure was built and was called Middle settlements Methodist Church. Though crude in comparison to our churches of today, it was certainly a step up from the sheds in which they had worshiped.



Blount County Forts

As the 1800s began, the history of Middlesettlements becomes somewhat unclear. It is recorded that weatherboarding was added in 1800; and in 1820, Henry Whittenberg sold six acres of land to the trustees of Middlesettlements Church for \$20. (A later deed from the early 1800s is now on display in the fellowship hall.) It is interesting to note that those trustees were: Sam Saffel, Ambrose Cox, Charles Warren, John Norwood, Benjamin Bonham, Henry Whittenberg, Jr., and Henry Whiting.



Middlesettlements Church, built 1796; weatherboarding added, 1800

One of these trustees, John Norwood, was a former Revolutionary War soldier. The earliest marked grave found in Middlesettlements Cemetery is that of his wife, Mary Hale Norwood (born September 13, 1763, died August 14, 1815). A legendary beginning of the cemetery tells of a baby falling from a wagon of a family traveling west. The child was crushed by the wagon wheels and was buried in a grave in what is now the cemetery.

It would be wonderful to know more of those early days. How fast did the church grow? Who led the services? What songs did they sing? Few records can be found of the achievements of those old Christian pioneers. We must assume

that Middlesettlements and the early Methodist movement in this region had a similar history. In 1810, there began a great spiritual revival in East Tennessee led by Reverend George Eakins. His ministry claimed thousands of converts as he rode through the valleys and coves. Camp meetings were common events and families sometimes camped for several days for the meetings. It is said that Reverend Eakins brought as many as 10,000 people into the church during his ministry. He also began organizing Sunday schools as early as 1813. (Burns, p. 116) Many other Methodist circuit riders traveled by horseback throughout the region, preaching with fire and enthusiasm. What a blessing it would be to have a diary or a journal of those early Middlesettlements church members. Unfortunately, we have no such history. Perhaps this lack of written history was due to the fact that most of those pioneers were illiterate, and they also were too busy carving out a life in a hostile environment to keep a journal. We do have one account in the journal of Bishop Asbury in which he wrote, "We crossed the Holston and rode ten miles to meet the people of John Saffles." (Burns, p. 111) It is thought that this meeting was at Middlesettlements church. (There is a Tennessee Historical Association marker on the New Knoxville Highway [U.S. Hwy 129 bypass] near Walmart which tells of this visit.) There was great expansion of the Methodist churches in the region during the early 1800s, and we do know that by 1862 there were eleven Methodist churches in Blount County alone!



TN Historical Association marker

(1818 date is in dispute and is currently being researched for confirmation or change.)

Troubled times lay ahead for the church in the 1860s, as it did for our young nation. The Civil War split churches in much the same way it split the country. In 1845, after a bitter fight over a Methodist Bishop's wife in Georgia owning slaves, the Southern Methodist churches broke away and formed the Methodist Episcopal Church South. When the war began, the Holston Conference voted to join this branch. Blount County, however, was a Union stronghold and even before the war ended, the Maryville circuit voted to rejoin the Northern Methodist Episcopal Church U.S.A.

On April 9, 1865, General Robert E. Lee and General Ulysses S. Grant met at a farmhouse in Appomattox, Virginia. General Lee surrendered and the Civil War officially ended. But peace on paper and peace within the hearts of men are two completely different things. More than 600,000 men had died

and close to a million more were sick or crippled. In Tennessee, battles had been costly to both the Union and Confederate supporters. Raiders took livestock, burned barns, and left little for people to eat. Schools and churches were abandoned, and, in all probability, most people were left with bitterness, anger, and feelings of hopelessness. At Middlesettlements Methodist Church, people had laughed, talked, prayed, and found God together since 1796. But after the war, the church's firm foundation seemed shaky indeed. Church members who had once been friends were facing great loss and the monumental task of Christian forgiveness. In the years soon after the war, both the Northern and Southern Methodist Conferences claimed some churches. At times, there were two preachers appointed to the same church! After the war, the Southern faction within Middlesettlements Methodist Church broke away and formed what was to become Saint Marks Methodist Church in Louisville.

What a hard time that must have been, but Middlesettlements endured. There were surely many compromises by the members. Jared Mead left letters from 1882, in which he recounts that in 1875 it was agreed that the Northern and Southern branches would have equal rights for 99 years to use Middlesettlements Church for worship by helping to repair it, and, in 1876, the repaired church was dedicated. (Mead) While healing and forgiveness must have been difficult, it occurred, and Middlesettlements continued to serve God and His people.

Our church is fortunate in that for many years there have been people who have kept records of different church programs. There are records of the Women's Society and of Sunday schools from the late 1800s. It is interesting to read in old Sunday school ledgers about the attendance and collections.

On June 14, 1891, it states the following:

“The Sabbath School opened at Nine AM by singing the 20 number in Gospel Hymns.

Scripture read by Mr. Hedgecock

Prayer by Mr. O'Connor

Number of officers present 1

Number of teachers present 3

Number of scholars in the advanced class 14

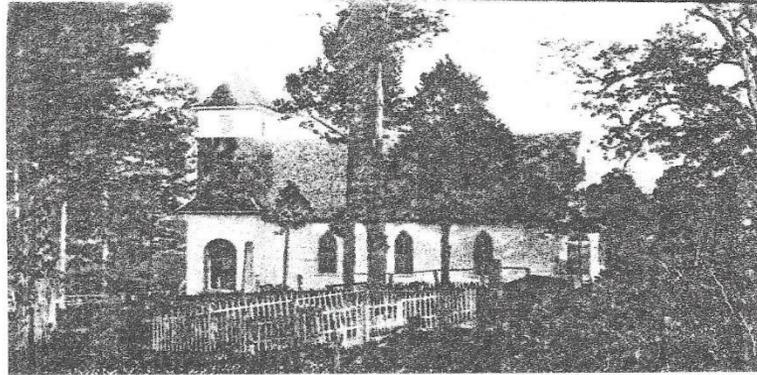
Number of scholars in the juvenile class 14

Total number engaged in school 39

Collection 69 cents”

This is the largest collection on any of the pages. Most of the amounts were under 20 cents.

As the century changed, the community changed with the times. It would not be long before cars were introduced, trains would replace horse-drawn carriages, and the problems of the world would cause men to leave to fight in World War I. There was good news for Middlesettlements. Records say a new church was built in 1915 near where the old building stood. The first service in the new church was July 11, 1915, with 76 people present!



Church built in 1915, burned in 1927

The joy of having a new place to worship would not last long. In 1927, during a worship service, the church caught fire. Vola Talbott, an eyewitness to the fire, described the tragedy as follows: "How well I remember that day. It was quite cold. We were sitting around the stove. The preacher was Reverend Kirby. He had just taken his text when Jim Byerly and Baxter Gideon opened the door and whispered that the church was on fire. It took only minutes for the building to burn down, but we saved the pews, piano, etc. I slung pews to the doors back and front. The men took them from there, besides taking the piano out....We had just got outside when down it came. I kept back tears till the big bell I had loved to hear ring back through the years came down with a terrifying bang." (Talbott) Those present that day were: Reverend Kirby, Floyd and Helen Johnson with their two small children, Maxine and Dortha, Everett Bailey, Henry Love, Jim Byerly, Baxter Gideon, Sarah Ann Simerly, Louis O'Connor, and Vola Phelps Talbott.

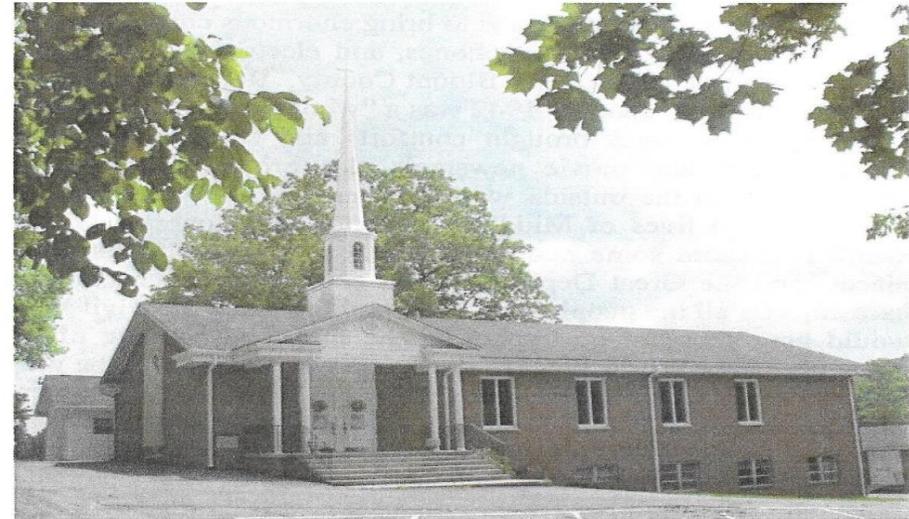
The congregation did not wait long to rebuild. In 1928, a new church was constructed, and that building is still used today for a fellowship hall and classrooms. Another cause for thanks and celebration was the reunification of the two branches of the Methodist church divided by the Civil War. Finally in 1939, after almost 100 years of being split, the two sides were reunited.



Church built in 1928, now serves as fellowship hall

The twentieth century was to bring enormous changes to the lives of everyone. Cars, telephones, and electricity (bringing a new church expense) came to Blount County. Records show that the electric bill for January 1942 was a “whopping” \$1.35. While many of the changes brought comforts and enjoyment to the people, radios and movie newsreels also brought information about events in the outside world. These events were soon to intrude on the lives of Middlesettlements parishioners. World War I had taken some people from the community to faraway places, and the Great Depression had caused terrible economic hardships on all the people; however, nothing since the Civil War would have more of an impact on the faith and courage of so many people as World War II. Everyone was touched by the war in some way. Gasoline and certain foods were rationed, women went to work in factories, and banners were hung in windows of homes with stars indicating family members who had gone to war. Middlesettlements Church had its banner with stars for those who were fighting far away, and it is still on display today in the fellowship hall.

Most of those soldiers returned home to their church and families. Many of them became leaders in the church, which began to grow. As time passed, it was decided a larger church was needed. (Several new classrooms had been built in the basement in the 1940s and 1950s.) Groundbreaking for a new church sanctuary and classrooms began in 1967, with Reverend Horace Henry the pastor. The cost of construction was \$85,000. Members of the congregation purchased pews, and plaques can be seen today on those pews. The first services were held in the present church sanctuary on Easter Sunday, April 6, 1969. A new steeple, with the old bell in it, was added to the church in 1970.



Built 1969

Not only was there a new church built in the 1960s, but Middlesettlements Methodist Church had a name change as well. In 1968, the Evangelical United Brethren merged with the Methodist church, forming what is now the United Methodist Church. Thereby our church became Middlesettlements United Methodist Church.

The next serious leap of faith for our congregation came when Middlesettlements voted to become a station church. It is hard for many of us to grasp that at one time Middlesettlements was part of a circuit which included five churches: Booth's Chapel, Axley's Chapel, Friendsville, Union Grove, and Middlesettlements. Congregations were fortunate to have a

minister to preach at their church once a month. In the 1970s, only Union Grove and Middlesettlements were on the circuit. Middlesettlements had grown rapidly, and many people felt it was time to separate from Union Grove. After a very close vote, Middlesettlements elected to buy a parsonage, separate from Union Grove, and become a solo church. On June 1, 1979, Middlesettlements United Methodist Church became a station church with the Reverend Frank Snavelly as the pastor.

In the next twenty years, the church added a new educational building (1985) with pastoral offices, a new grand piano, a new organ, a new sound system, and many other church improvements. Middlesettlements bought 10.5 acres in 1998 and an additional 9.856 acres in 2007, approximately one-half mile from the church. On the property, the church built a lovely pavilion. The land and pavilion are the setting for various services, including church-wide picnics, a community day, a fall “trunk or treat” festival, and Easter sunrise services. The property called “The Field of Dreams” offers land for many auxiliary events and the possibility of a new church one day.



Field of Dreams

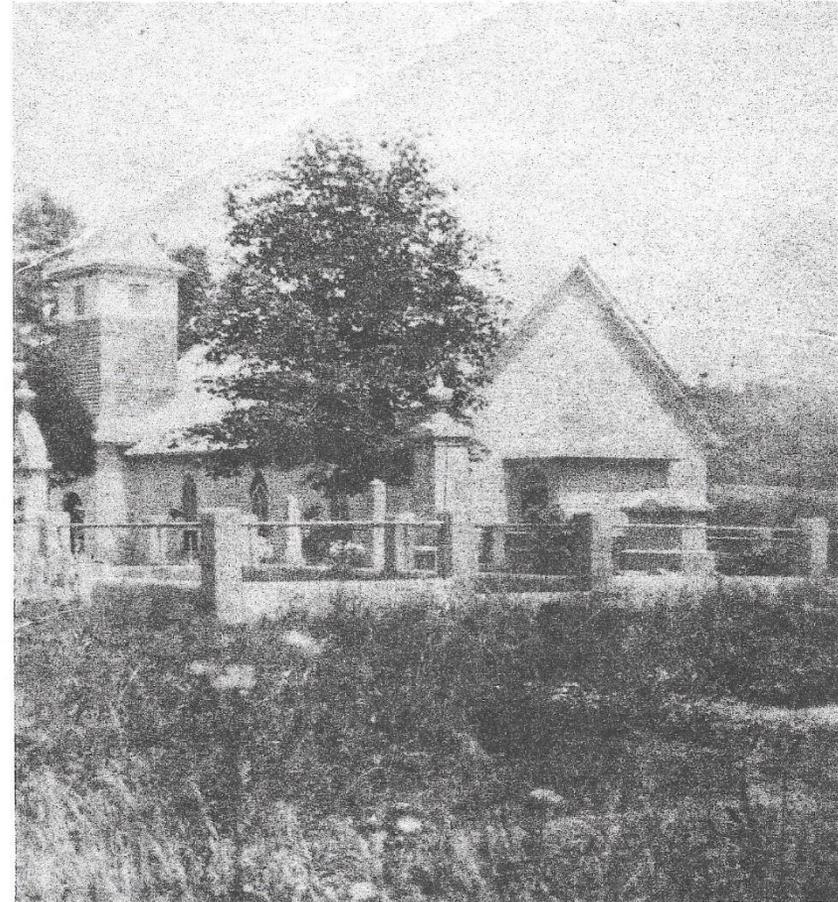
Our church attendance grew as the new century began. Many new programs were started in order to better serve God and to be a witness to His salvation. There are now two worship services: a contemporary service with praise music and a more traditional service. There is a prayer ministry, a visitation ministry, an excellent program for the Senior Saints, Bible studies, a church scholarship program, the Jim Overton Men’s Club, a praise team, a handbell choir, and an active children’s and youth ministry. Additionally, the church purchased a 26 passenger bus for use by groups in the church. Some things have continued from many years ago. There is still a Women’s Society (now called the Mertie Russell Circle/United Methodist Women), as there was in the 1930s; and we have been blessed for many years with an excellent choir under strong leadership. Throughout the years, our church has supported many overseas mission programs—a school in Paraguay, kits for children in Alaska and Africa, an orphanage in Haiti, and many others. Recently Middlesettlements became involved in two new ways of Christian service closer to home. Our church is participating in the Family Promise program for the homeless and the Louisville Christian Assistance Center for the hungry. On November 2, 2000, a Middlesettlements United Methodist Church Endowment Program was chartered. Through this program, our church has been fortunate to benefit financially from the following: the Callie Goddard Memorial, the Vertrue and Ruby Sharp Fund, and the Pete Brown Memorial Life Enrichment Fund. We have also had some adversity. During a hailstorm in the spring of 2011, Middlesettlements had extensive roof and siding damage, and many windows were blown out. For a time we had to worship in a sanctuary with boarded-up windows. But repairs have been made and the church looks good again.

A lot has happened in our world since those first settlers came to the region. We have learned to live with nuclear weapons and terrorism, we’ve gone to the moon, we’ve become a

world with computers controlling much of our lives, and we've become attached to people through social media and phones in ways we can still barely grasp. We have also become involved in wars in far off lands and are even now in conflicts not far from where our Savior first walked on this earth. With our usage of rockets and satellites, the world and even other planets have become part of our daily lives. It would be easy to wonder about the importance of events which occurred in our church so long ago. It is certainly true that we are different from those early saints of the church. Sadly, many of those dear church members who lived, loved, cried, prayed, and talked to God here in this church are now gone. Do we not owe a great debt to those saints who have gone before us to remember them and the history of the church that they built? They too endured great sorrows and troubles, but with God's help they endured. Remembering these words from Hebrews, "Wherefore, seeing we also are encompassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith..." (Hebrews 12:1-2)

So, here we are at Middlesettlements United Methodist Church in 2012, ringing that same old bell, praying in our beloved old church, and searching for a faith to help us live a Godly life and give us hope for eternity. Let us pray that those who come after us will find us faithful.

Brenda Clemens



*Church that burned in 1927*

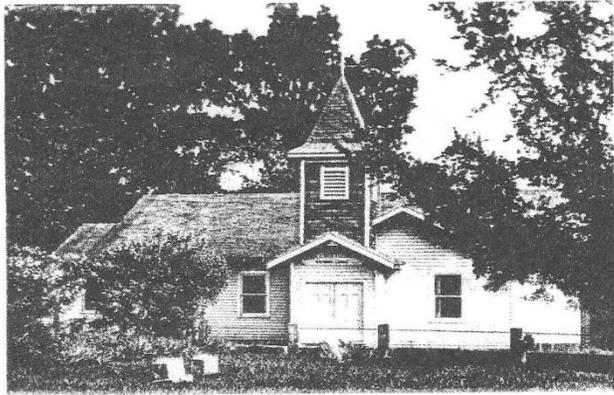


*213<sup>rd</sup> Methodist Church about 1916*

**Sunday School, December 3, 1916**



**Vacation Bible School, May 7, 1937**



*Built in 1928, now serves as fellowship hall*



*Photo of church from "Tennessee Alcoa," June, 1952*



*WWII Banner with names of church members & neighborhood men who went to war. Gold stars indicate those who died in action.*

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