“SO DEAR TO MY CHILDHOOD”: THE RURAL CHURCH SITE AS AN ARTIFACT OF MATERIAL CULTURE

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“There’s a church in the valley by the wildwood,  
No lovelier spot in the dale;  
No place is so dear to my childhood  
As the little brown church in the vale.”

“The Church in the Wildwood”  
Dr. William S. Pitts, 1938

What is it exactly that endears a geographic site to our hearts? What family quest could have led an out-of-state visitor to slip a note under the locked door of old Chinn’s Chapel United Methodist Church near Copper Canyon, Texas, saying, “My ancestors were early settlers in this church. Can somebody with history contact me?” What went through the minds of the couple who sent a check for the renovation of Chinn’s Chapel, now standing near the site of Chinn’s Chapel School which is no longer in existence? Is today’s religious experience anything like the testimony of the Alabama octogenarian who has returned to the spot of his childhood once more and recalls for us the exact date he was saved by Jesus, the circumstances of the revival meeting, and the way it changed his life? What is the compelling nature of this four-acre vintage location in Denton County, Texas? Surely such a beloved spot has a special cultural significance.

Historian Pierce Lewis has written about the landscape itself as material culture, stating that any landscape which is altered by humankind thus becomes an artifact of material culture. “The subdivision, allocation, and aesthetic decor of an area (what is done to make an area ‘look nice’ or conversely to harm or decimate it) reveals patterns of basic rituals of American culture that are bound by strictures of good taste, proper behavior, religious doctrines, and political codes.” Certain events in the history of Chinn’s Chapel United Methodist Church site have conferred such special significance upon it that individuals return to it on a regular basis to remember and renew the meaning it has held for them throughout their lives. How can we understand today the significance of a religious era and rural lifestyle that has vanished from existence?

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The Chinn’s Chapel site has been an important landmark since the settlement of the area in 1845. Here were abundant timber and water that furnished the settlement which grew up around four freshwater springs near Hickory Creek. The fifth settlement of pioneers who had received land grants from the Republic of Texas to Peter’s Colony was established in what is now the Chinn’s Chapel Community during 1845, the year Texas became the twenty-eighth state of the Union. Essentially, it was a farming frontier and part of the first large Texas settlement on the prairies. A nondenominational congregation gathered to worship in a log cabin surrounded by their burial ground on a hill called Antioch. The ten-acre site, donated by Mary (1808–1871) and Elisha Chinn (1802–1876), pioneer settlers who came from Alabama in 1853, is located one-fourth mile northwest of the present Chinn’s Chapel United Methodist Church site in Denton County, Texas. One of the most precious artifacts of north Texas Methodism is the Chinn Bible, given to the church by Mrs. Randy McMakin (Katie) in 1990.

Although no regular services were held at Antioch, runners were sent out to call the community together whenever a preacher passed through or a “burying” took place. Diaries of Methodist circuit riders reveal long journeys, hard fare, and dangers from crossing streams and rivers, from Native American enemies, and from wild animals. Yet they were studious men, often highly cultured, “brave men of brains and brawn,” consecrated to spreading the Gospel. The pioneer settlers were similarly devoted and sacrificial. Bed and board were willingly shared with never before seen circuit riders who might never be seen again. It was “the real frontier, raw, wild, and wide open.”

Used as a church, a school, and a temporary shelter for pioneer families building their own cabins, the log cabin at Antioch became the center of social and religious activity of one of the chief settlements of Denton County. (The county itself was named for John Bunyan Denton, attorney and Methodist circuit rider, who lost his life battling Native Americans). From 1850 to 1867, the year North Texas was designated the Trinity Conference in American Methodism, there was rapid growth in the Chinn’s Chapel area. Preachers

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7 Seymour V. Connor, *The Peter’s Colony of Texas* (Austin, Texas: The Texas State Historical Association, 1959), 120.
dealt with poor salaries, harsh conditions, and a lack of buildings. Theirs was the challenge to build the church of Jesus Christ in the wilderness.\textsuperscript{9}

When the congregation at Antioch decided to hold regular Sunday services and adopt organizational plans, they sought membership in the North Texas Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Admitted in 1872, they officially named the log cabin “Chinn’s Chapel,” since members of the Chinn family were recognized both for the existence of the original nondenominational log cabin church, as well as the organization of its congregation as Methodists.\textsuperscript{10} In 1877 the church’s trustees purchased four acres in the valley below the log cabin and cemetery, and there they erected a new building in the style of late 19th-century rural Texas religious architecture. The new Chinn’s Chapel was built on the site of their early camp meetings.\textsuperscript{11}

Camp meetings were significant events in the social and religious lives of North Texans, deepening the commitment of believers, winning new converts and producing striking impressions. Successful as the chief evangelical tool of the church, membership in the North Texas Conference increased from 7,495 to 51,028, and the number of preachers grew from forty-nine to 146 during the years from 1867 to 1896.\textsuperscript{12}

In August, the most convenient time in the agricultural calendar, almost the whole populace from miles around arrived at Chinn’s Chapel in wagons, on horseback, and on foot to set up tents, cookfires, and a temporary worship structure called a “brushy arbor.” It was a simple framework of light timber, roofed over with leafy branches. Underneath were backless benches and a torchlit platform with a crude pulpit.\textsuperscript{13} Many preachers were invited to participate, and they prepared diligently. People waited until camp meeting to join the church and there was great speculation as to which members of the community, what strangers, and how many in all would be converted. Half-revival, half-vacation, the camp meeting was designed to produce a profound effect. The mounting exuberance of the preachers was often puzzling to the children, as well as the outpouring of emotion among those adults usually engaged in the sobering realities of farm work. Not only did they discuss their religious experience, but also their farm and family experience, from birthing babies to seed crops to curing meat to hiving bees.\textsuperscript{14}

“My grandfather Billie Potts would come west out of Argyle and camp for two weeks or longer,” recalled Marvin Dillard of camp meeting at Chinn’s

\textsuperscript{9}Vernon, \textit{Methodism Moves}, 45.
\textsuperscript{10}Vernon, \textit{Methodism Moves}, 387; Bates, \textit{History and Reminiscences}, 75.
\textsuperscript{11}Bates, \textit{History and Reminiscences}, 75.
\textsuperscript{12}Vernon, \textit{Methodism Moves}, 118.
\textsuperscript{14}Thrall, \textit{History of Methodism}, 73–75.
Chapel. "This is where my father John met my mother Lila." Camp meeting continued day after day indefinitely as a "protracted meeting," until all possible souls had been saved and all possible members added to the church. If judged successful, it was called a "revival" in retrospect, as there had been a revival of religion. So many members were converted in camp meetings that North Texas Methodists were said to be suspicious of anyone who "got religion in the winter, between 'lay-in' in' and 'fodder pullin' time." Toward the end of the 19th century, north Texas became more thickly populated, and railroad travel made large camp meetings, such as those in Galveston and Paris, Texas, more accessible. Intimate, rural camp meetings drew fewer and fewer participants, as families made plans to travel to exciting new places. These large camp meetings soon became too protracted and sometimes violent. Drinking water was at a premium, interest centered on food, and campfire cooks found themselves sharing all that they had with tramps, politely called "strangers." Lemonade and ice cream stands produced a carnival atmosphere. Methodists complained of what they considered insincere conversions and a lack of doctrinal preaching.

As camp meetings declined even in the rural church, the summer revival took its place with a visiting preacher, often a husband and wife team, and a visiting song leader. No longer urged to conversion by a concerted team of visiting preachers, musical expression gained in prominence. As the 19th century drew to a close, Chinn’s Chapel was regularly served by circuit riders, appointed first from the Gainesville District and then from the Dallas-Denton District. George W. Jackson (1827–1906), Methodist preacher, school administrator, and pioneer merchant from Tennessee, settled near Chinn’s Chapel in 1882. A popular revival leader, he delivered his "soul-stirring oratorios" and spread the practice of shaped note singing, using tunes from a Methodist hymnal written by his circuit-riding father John Batchelor Jackson in 1838.

George W. Jackson travelled with his wife Sarah Ann, who brought her pump organ, and their four sons who were known as "The Jackson Quartet" or "The Singing Jackson Boys." A permanent structure for revival meetings was built on the site of the former brushy arbor. The new structure had a shingled roof supported by log poles with open sides. These structures built on many rural Texas church grounds were called "tabernacles." Members standing on the Chinn’s Chapel grounds at twilight recall John Dillard, known as "The Old Lamplighter;"

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17 Vernon, Methodism Moves, 117–118.
18 Monk et al., The Methodist Excitement, 117–121.
striding across the field toward the tabernacle with a lighted Coleman lantern. He pumped, ignited, adjusted, and hung the lanterns from exposed pine ceiling joists, providing a bright white light. Jewell Russell played the piano while her husband Johnnie led the singing, swaying to and fro and from side to side. The preacher paced, shouted, and exhorted, and the people responded in kind, fanning all the while with cardboard fans with wooden handles to alleviate August's heat and defend themselves from insects.21

The spiritual condition of the church was assessed by the lay members in August and strength built among them for the coming winter, during which time it was tended by travelling preachers. Chinn's Chapel supported the initiatives of the North Texas Conference through finances, service, and prayer.22 From 1876 to 1900, there was, however, little gain in Methodist membership throughout north Texas. There was a general depression in business, turmoil over "the holiness movement, and problems with "professional" evangelists. Also changes in the Methodist organization's district lines led to membership losses. Those active in the holiness movement insisted that every Christian must have a second cleansing or blessing or renewing, and they set themselves up to judge whether others had done so, often behaving in judgmental, prideful, and divisive ways.23 In addition to these problems, there was the effect of technological change. Improvements in transportation and communication, as well as a growing urban environment in north Texas, brought about changes in the way people responded to religious influence and expressed religious feeling. There was the recognition that earlier evangelism had been too exclusively individualistic and emotional. The sins of an urban society made up of transient residents could not be reached through cyclical rural revivalism.24

Chinn's Chapel remained a busy and important site, however, due to the close relationship of home, church, and school. Even the log cabin in the cemetery, which first bore the name "Chinn's Chapel," had long served as a Sunday School and weekday public school for the children of the community. As early as the 1850s, a movement had surfaced to move away from nondenominational "union" Sunday Schools to Methodist doctrinal classes using Methodist literature.25 The Methodist circuit riders recognized the importance of the Christian nurture of children and came to the communities prepared to give some attention to Christian education, as well as preaching. An "Essayist" wrote anonymously in the Texas Wesleyan Banner in 1851, "Our

22 Quarterly Conference at Chinn's Chapel, Feb. 19, 1877. MS Record of Conference Minutes by C. M. Jacobsen in "History of the First Methodist Church of Lewisville, Texas." Unpublished MS, undated, First Methodist Church, Lewisville, Texas.
23Vernon, Methodism Moves, 143–151.
25Vernon, Methodism Moves, 143–151.
most imperious obligations are to prepare ourselves to instruct the little company of rustics in the log cabin when we have found it; to 'feed the flock of Christ' when we minister to it." 26 By 1877 the purpose of the Sunday Schools was very clear. "The chief design of the Sabbath School is to lead children to Christ, and this part of our work should be purely evangelical." 27

Sunday schools met more often than the regularly worshipping congregation, since the circuit riding preacher might come once a month on Sunday but the members who taught Sunday school would be present each week. Teachers became important members of the community, often earning a special place in the memories of the children. At Bridwell Library at Southern Methodist University, we find a lovely silk handkerchief given to Ethel Calvert by her Sunday school teacher Ruby Harris in 1918. It had been kept pressed in Mrs. Calvert's Bible for well over three quarters of a century. 28

Methodist Sunday school literature included "Our Little People, Illustrated Lesson Paper," and *Sunday School Magazine*. These sought to please the children, though the attitude of north Texans toward children was that they should be made to fear the consequences of sin and seek the Savior's pardon. High infant and child mortality rates made parents aware of the fragility of child life and the need for early conversion and Bible knowledge. From 1890 to 1900, Sunday schools declined, but as the status of children rose in society and the viewpoint of the child came into consideration, a surge of interest during the first quarter of the 19th century boosted Sunday school membership to 72.8 per cent of church membership in 1910. 29

On Mother's Day in 1933, Chinn's Chapel honored Mrs. H. B. (Orleana) Jernigan, aged eighty-seven, with a service and ceremony in her honor as the only living member of the Sunday school class formed in 1872. 30 After her death, a relative who had visited her grave at Chinn's Chapel described the church site to friends:

Sunday School is held in this building, also called Chins Chapel [sic] as the old chapel is no longer used every Sunday. There are 17 benches in the church. A shingled arbor about 30 by 50 feet is close to the west side of the building. The Rev. Atchley, who makes his home in Lewisville, preaches at Chinn's Chapel once a month, the other Sundays being divided between Methodist churches at Argyle, Lake Dallas, and Cooper. 31

Public school was also held at Chinn's Chapel. It had as its precedent the weekday public school which formerly had been held in the log cabin in the cemetery. A new building named "Chinn's Chapel School" was established as

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27North Texas Journal, 1877, 6.
28Item: Silk Handkerchief, Gift of Ruby Harris to Ethel Calvert, 1918, Ethel Calvert to Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, 1992.
The Rural Church Site as an Artifact of Material Culture

Public School Number 62 in 1884. The two-story “Chapel School” reached its peak enrollment of about 128 just after the turn of the century. The upper floor served as a Woodsmen of the World Lodge where a men’s social group sponsored by an insurance company of that name met on a regular basis. Chinn’s Chapel site was home to large gatherings for area softball games, and families arrived in wagons loaded with watermelons and other picnic fare, also chairs from home.

While children’s social roles continued as receivers of traditional farm values and the experiences of farm life, changes in transportation, communication, and technology began to alleviate hardships and open doors to new ways of thinking and new occupations. Living side by side with adults, children learned the difficult competencies of farm labor, from winnowing, canning, and hog-killing to planting, tending, and harvesting corn, cotton, sorghum cane, and peanuts. They brought joy and laughter to farm parents and relatives as they fished for crawdads and played “Hide and Seek,” “Piggy Wants a Signal,” “Knock the Tin Can,” and “Tree Tag.” They were also a source of major concern and responsibility. Medical care in the community was primitive, and church members took turns “sitting up with the sick and dying.” Whooping cough, diphtheria, measles, chicken pox, small pox, and polio were the scourges of childhood and threatened adult health as well. Children walked to Chapel School, and the legend exists of a tiny girl, unable to keep up with her peers walking home, who froze to death in the sudden temperature change Texans call a “blue norther.”

Even the provision of basic human needs was, at times, difficult.

“I want to tell you one thing that happened in my life that made such an effect I never got over it,” Ethel Calvert shared. She grew up on a forty-acre farm in the Chinn’s Chapel Community and attended Chapel School:

At times we didn’t have enough to eat, because my mother was making a living for eight children and her old mother. So one time ... my mother knelt down by the old fireplace ... and she said, ‘Now Father, I can’t feed my children. I’m out of food. And would You show me a way, because they’re Your children as well as mine. And I can’t stand to see them go hungry.’ My brother and sister went to the mailbox that day. There was a five dollar bill that my uncle had sent us, never before nor never after. Five dollars in those days would buy as much as fifty nowadays, or maybe seventy-five. And that’s the way He showed us that He cared. It made such an impression on me, seeing my mother go down on her knees asking God to send us something to eat. He did.34

As young adults left the community, they took with them in their hearts the joys and struggles of their farm upbringing and the embodiment of its values in their memories of rural Methodism at Chinn’s Chapel.

32Minutes of the Commissioners Court, Court House-on-the-Square, Denton, Texas, 1877; Myrtle Watson, “Education: A Debt the Present Owes to the Future,” Denton County Historical Society, Denton, Texas, May 3, 1977.
34Ethel Calvert, oral history to Shirley B. Faile, Copper Canyon, Texas: Tape & Typescript, May 9, 1989.
Enrollment declined at Chapel School from 1910 to 1920, and in 1921 Denton County closed the school by building a larger school farther away and sending children from Chapel and another rural school to it. The severing of home, school, and church ties caused bitter feelings in the area, especially the decision to demolish Chinn’s Chapel School and use the lumber to build the new school. Finally, the lone structure left standing on the Chinn’s Chapel site was the Chapel itself, shaded by majestic old-growth oak trees. The east side of the structure sank precariously into the ground, and the pews slanted so severely that the eight remaining members slid to the right ends of the pews. Birds, squirrels, mice, wasps, and bees made their homes in the Chapel, and weeds abounded outside.

Though Chinn’s Chapel had remained an isolated row crop farming community as late as the 1930s, its young people were drawn into the city and then into the world community, first in search of work during the Depression Era and then through World War II. After the war, few returned to carry on the farm work and rural lifestyles of their childhoods. Travel, education, technology, economic conditions, social issues, and new understandings of religious experience led them to live their adult lives elsewhere. Farming gave way to cattle ranching, and eventually to light industry. Brick homes on acre lots were built on the hills overlooking the chapel, and paved roads heavy with traffic heading for work at Dallas–Fort Worth Airport shimmered in the summer heat beside the old white chapel in its field of wildflowers, near centuries-old freshwater springs.

In 1988 the eight remaining members made a pact to seek to understand the history of Chinn’s Chapel and to draw on its strengths in order to preserve rural American Methodism in north Texas. District Superintendent Bruce Weaver, impressed with twelve tiny churches, including Chinn’s Chapel, which had long paid their conference apportionments in full and well in advance, noted that these churches formed a crown when pinpointed on a map. Dubbing them “The Crown Churches,” he provided the encouragement and leadership necessary to enable the members to rebuild the congregation. Eighty-five-year-old Pastor Don Duran came forth from retirement to lead the congregation. The church received the Marvin T. Judy Award for Excellence in Small Churches in 1992. Presently Chinn’s Chapel is led by young Rev. John Pflug who manages an insurance agency and studies for the ministry at Southern Methodist University. Descendants of farm families befriend suburban members seeking a home in Christ.

Asked why she thought Chinn’s Chapel had survived all these years, Ethel Calvert responded,

Well, my answer’s going to sound funny, but I think God’s been in this church all along, and He’s overseeing it. As long as people will come there and listen, it will be there. Now I may have that down wrong, but that’s my belief. You’ve seen so many little churches just

35Bridges, History of Denton, 346.
be done away with, but so many people love to go to a small church. And it’s always been a small church, although there has been more people than go there now, but . . . God is there.36

Historically, Chinn’s Chapel is a significant landmark site because it was the social, educational, and religious center of an important farming community for well over a century since the 1840s. It was an important Methodist camp meeting site during the era of protracted meetings. It was the site of large annual summer revivals as Methodism moved across north Texas. It was endeared to the hearts of children through their attendance at Sunday school and public school. It was a training ground for many young Methodist ministers launching their pastoral careers and a homecoming to those nearing retirement. Today Chinn’s Chapel is the site of a fall festival, homecoming dinner on the grounds, and wiener roasts for families with young children, activities that continue to preserve the pioneer values of a now unique rural lifestyle based on simplicity, togetherness, and trust in God.

36Ethel Calvert, oral history, 1989.