

A Hoosier Barn that was a Church

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It is just an every-day sort of barn of unpretentious character that one finds near La Fontaine,¹ Indiana, but the building was once a haven of pioneer worship. This building was originally erected in 1845, and was known as the Antioch Baptist Church. For thirteen years following its construction, no records were kept by the congregation. In the first minutes, there is an entry indicating that Elder John Sparks preached his first sermon in the Church on December 1, 1858; his last sermon was delivered in November, 1862. He died in March, 1863.

Elder Sparks, first preacher whose name appears in the records, settled in Wabash County, Indiana, in 1853, having come from South Carolina. He purchased land near the little town of America, which later disappeared. He was a brother of William Sparks, Baptist minister at the old log church of Cedar Grove, and uncle of William Sparks, the second, who was also a pioneer Baptist preacher. Elizabeth Harlan, who became the wife of Elder John Sparks, was also from South Carolina. She came to Indiana with her parents in 1814.²

The right to use the land on which the Antioch Church was built was granted without cost by Benjamin Lines, a member of the congregation. His farm was mortgaged, and he lost it, but it was later bought by Coon Lines, who sold the church site to the trustees for twenty-five dollars.

The members of the Church as shown by the earliest records were: Thomas Lyons and wife, Elizabeth; William R. Richards and wife, Rosena; Isaac Blades and wife, Martha; Silas Lines; Conrad Sellars and wife, Chaterine; Harry Scott; Susan Sailers; Tobitha Frazee; Alfred Lines; and Benjamin Lines.

Discontinued as a place of worship in 1883, the old Church was used as a dwelling by several different families for a time. In 1903 the lot was purchased by the present owner, Mrs. Effie Williams, great-granddaughter of Elder John Sparks. It was at this time that the old house of worship was turned into a barn. The building was moved farther

¹ The town of LaFontaine is in the southeastern part of Wabash County, on Grant Creek, a tributary of the Mississinewa. The earlier name of the town was Ashland.

² The author of this article has a picture of Elder John Sparks taken when he was about thirty years of age, and a picture of his widow in her old age.

back on the lot, and a house built where it had stood. The roof of the building was raised, some new siding used, and doors and windows changed.

The present building reveals clearly the location of the two church doors at one end of the building.³ One of these doors served as an entrance for the women of the congregation, the other for the men, since they sat on opposite sides of the room. One of the doors is boarded up completely. The other is closed part way, leaving room for a single window-sash above. There is a shed on one side of the building. An inspection of the end opposite the old Church doors and of the side opposite the shed, where none of the old siding of the Church remains, suggests nothing whatever except a present day barn of modest size.

The old Antioch Baptist Church which served a pioneer community for nearly forty years can be recognized only on close inspection. The paths to its doors were once well trodden by the feet of eager, believing persons. These paths were obliterated a number of years ago, and the surroundings changed. The members of the original congregation have all passed away, but the descendants of those original members cherish the fast-fading picture of the old Church, as it was before the transformation into the present-day barn. They think of it with reverence as a shrine of pioneer worship.³

³ The author is a descendant of a brother of Elder John Sparks.