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## Mt. Hope: A Pioneer Church

Inez Schneider Whitney

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by Inez Schneider Whitney

ILLUSTRATION BY  
LESLIE HUNNICUTT

# Mt. Hope

## a Pioneer Church

One of my earliest recollections is sitting on Papa's knee in one of the long wooden pews at Mt. Hope. The sermons seemed endless, and Papa used to amuse me by dangling his gold pocket watch on its chain and letting me see the second hand go round.

Mt. Hope was only one of many small churches scattered over Western Oklahoma in the early nineteen hundreds. Most of them were Protestant with an occasional Catholic.

All the members of Mt. Hope lived on farms close to the church. Since it was before the day of the automobile and all of us went to services in buggies, surreys, and wagons, with a few on horseback, distance was important. Mama was from Indiana and had been reared in the Episcopal Church, and Papa was a Lutheran from Nebraska. They chose to be Methodists since Mt. Hope was only a mile away. Mt. Hope was a Southern Methodist Church. It was many years later when the Northern and Southern jurisdictions merged to form the present United Methodist Church.

Mt. Hope was a one-room frame building painted white. Although it had a steeple, the pioneer parishioners could not afford a bell. It was all they could do to pay the minister's meager salary. He often was not paid for months and then some Sunday at the end of services Mr. Will Little, one of the mainstays of the church, would say, "All right, folks. Let's stay a few minutes and see what we

can do to help our minister. Now, I will give \$50 to start. Who will match it?" Usually no one else. Then he would go to \$25.00, \$10.00, and so on down to \$1.00. Sometimes as much as two or three hundred dollars would be pledged. Mt. Hope shared its minister with the Methodist church in the small town of Custer, four miles away. He held services one Sunday at Mt. Hope and the next Sunday in Custer.

The church building stood on a small acreage on the northeast corner of a farm. Probably the land had been donated by the owner. On the south side was a cemetery. If we were early, Papa used to take my hand and say, "I want to walk over to Ma's grave." I never knew my grandmother since she died when I was three months old, but I made many trips to her grave. Now my grandfather lies beside her.

Sunday School was held every Sunday. The classes were scattered around in different parts of the sanctuary. Mrs. Wynn was my primary teacher. I really loved her. At the end of each lesson she gave us a card. I remember when she started giving them. The first one had a picture of the world and started with creation. I really didn't like being promoted when I was older because we were given a booklet for the whole quarter instead of the lovely colored cards.

Everyone stayed for church. If a baby cried or a small child became restless, the mother would take it to the back of the

sanctuary and pace back and forth to soothe it the best she could.

Mrs. Newton played the organ for the singing. Every few Sundays a quartet composed of her husband Mark, Hermie Sauers and her husband August, and Jim Dooley's single sister Mary sang a special. The Southern Methodist was the old-time conservative religion. Services were interrupted with long prayers, many on bended knee. There were loud shouts of "Hallelujah," "Praise the Lord," "Amen Brother," and others.

Every year a revival was held. This was an effort to bring sinners into the fold who had not been "saved." Usually a Methodist minister from another church not too far away came to conduct services. These revivals always lasted a week and sometimes two.

I remember how important I felt when I joined the church. I was twelve years old. I had always envied the people who took communion. Members were asked to come forward, a small group at a time, and kneel in a long row in front of the sanctuary. Then the minister passed a glass of grape juice down the row, exhorting everyone in turn to take a sip. Then the glass was passed on to the next person. How different from today with the tiny individual glasses.

The church provided much of the social life of the community. The observance of Christmas was a wonderful time for the

whole family. The women started making plans weeks ahead. They sewed small bags with drawstrings out of colored mosquito bar (a fine net used to spread over tables to keep mosquitoes off the food). When the time drew near, each bag was filled with an apple, an orange, nuts, and candy. There were enough bags and to spare for everyone, even adults. An elaborate program was planned, and many rehearsals were held. There were songs, drills, plays, and individual recitations. I really was happy one year when I was an angel with wings.

On Christmas Eve everyone donned his "Sunday clothes" for the occasion. Families took most of their gifts to be given out at church. There was always an immense tree that reached almost to the ceiling. It would be beautifully decorated with strings of popcorn and cranberries and other homemade ornaments. Real candles were in holders all over the tree and lighted when it was time for the gifts to be given out.

I especially remember one Christmas. I loved dolls and had written a letter to Santa to ask for a doll. When we entered the church, there were many dolls hanging on the tree but I saw one that I thought was the most beautiful of all. How I wished she could be mine. What a surprise when Santa took her off the tree and called my name. She is still one of my prized possessions.

Another highlight enjoyed by all was the Children's Day every spring. The program took the place of Sunday School. Only children participated. One Children's Day I was given a recitation to learn, and one was given to my little four-year-old brother. I helped him learn it and still remember every word:

A little bird up in a tree  
Sang his happy song out to me  
And this is what I heard him say,  
"Be glad, dear child; 'tis Children's Day."

After the program there was "Dinner on the Grounds." Some of the men had brought lumber the day before and built several long tables. The lumber had been loaned by Antrim Lumber Co. in Custer. Then what a bountiful feast was spread. Every housewife had spent hours the day before to prepare her best recipes. Mama was famous for her cherry pie. I still remember Mr. Agan, a neighbor, calling to her, "Mrs. Schneider, I hope you brought some of your cherry pies."

These are but a few of my precious memories of Mt. Hope. I visited where Mt. Hope once stood the last time I was in Oklahoma. The building was gone, but the cemetery remained and was beautifully kept. My thoughts took me back to the time when it was a place of worship for the Littles, Newtons, Dooleys, Agans, Bozarth's, Sauers, Driscolls, Schneiders, and other pioneer families.

Then I thought again of Papa's gold watch and chain and the second hand that was so fascinating.

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