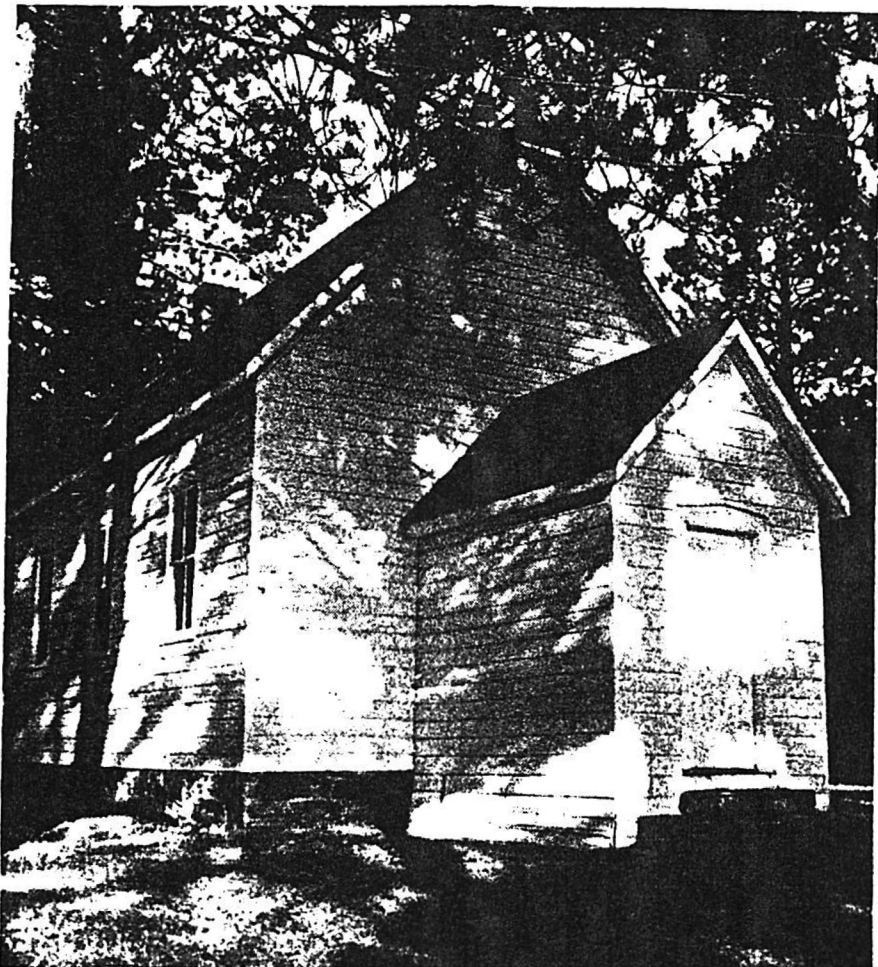


Twelve Mile Church

Timeless traditions



Inside and out, Twelve Mile Church is definitely "plain cake" as befits a house of worship built by cost-conscious Presbyterians.

by Susan Wilson

If, on the Saturday of the May long weekend, you were driving along the dirt road that follows the east shore of Twelve Mile Lake, you would have seen an unremarkable group of men and women and children cleaning up the yard of Twelve Mile church. In a church of timeless traditions, this is one of the most amiable. There is no formal announcement beyond a simple notice in the local papers. Just the place and the time - no directions how to get there, no exhortations urging attendance. But those in the know, know. And they came, about 30 of them, armed with rakes and lawn mowers.

"Nobody is in charge," says Bill Chambers, who has four generations from both sides of his family buried at Twelve Mile. "People just show up, bring their own tools, and do the part of the work that suits them. Most of them have relatives buried here. A few have come up for the weekend to visit and just come along to help."

In the days before the Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregational churches joined to form the United Church of Canada in 1925, Twelve Mile was of the Presbyterian persuasion. Chambers' ancestors were very active in the establishment of the congregation. The original church documents ended up in the possession of his uncle and are

now kept by his cousin. Chambers has a black binder of photocopies he made of the original documents dating back to the 1880's. It is one of the delights of modern technology that his photocopies are more legible than the originals.

The documents show that the church began its formal life with a grant from the Crown dated March 25, 1880, of four acres of land, "part of Lot 15 in the Twelfth concession in the Township of Minden ... for the erection of a Church for the Presbyterians of the Locality". The grant was made to the three trustees of the Minden and Stanhope Presbyterian church: James Johnston, William Chambers, and William Blair. And there matters rested for ten years.

"There are rumours of a log church before the frame one was built," says Chambers, "but there's no firm evidence of when or where it might have been built, or even if it ever existed." There are also references to "Brown's Station" which have echoes of "Brown's Appointment" mentioned in the history of Zion United Church in Carnarvon. Both these may refer to the school on Highway 118 one kilometre east of Carnarvon where services were held prior to the construction of either formal place of worship.

In any event, construction of the frame church at Twelve Mile began in September 1890. The documents reveal a concern for expense only proper to the Scottish adherents of John Knox. Year in and year out, every penny in and out is accounted for.

Funds for the building were raised through pledges from the men of the congregation who promised to pay "the sum set opposite our name or equivalent in value toward the erection of a New Presbyterian Church for Brown's Station to be erected before the end of the year 1890 and to be paid as soon as the Church is finished or before." Below are the names of 28 men and beside them amounts which total \$116.42. In addition, a Rev. Bennett from Peterborough seems to have canvassed people in that area, 20 of whom provided a total of \$68.

The Presbyterians of Twelve Mile also showed a concern for the proper delegation of authority:

"Minutes of the Meeting of Building Committee held at D. Chambers on August 11, 1890. 1890.

"Moved by William Chambers, 2nd by John Howell that John Johnston be appointed to go to Fenelon Falls to see after lumber and supplies for Church.

"Moved by Wm. Chambers, 2nd by Thos. Wells that the whole Contract be let to one man. Carried.

"Moved by Wm. Chambers, 2nd by Thos. Wells that John Johnston be overseer of building Church at the sum of One Dollar per Day. Carried.

"Moved by Wm. Chambers, 2nd by Thos. Wells, that John Johnston order the rough lumber and scantling from Steven Dawson. Carried."

John Johnson did as he was bid and detailed bills of sale show him in Fenelon Falls on September 13, ordering supplies from Jos. Head for a total of \$17.02 and from W. McKeown for \$8.20. On October 2, Johnston was back in Fenelon Falls where he spent \$85.60 at J. A. Ellis' lumber yard. On November 8, he went to Minden where he spent \$12 on shingles at J. Goodman's shingle mill. He also prepared a careful record of the names of the men who worked on the church between September 16 and December 13, on what days, for how many hours, and how much they were owed.

With all the concern over financial and constitutional matters, the minutes fail to record any of the social details of the church opening. But the building was completed by the end of the year, as projected.

In 1894, timber was cut for a new drive shed to house the horses carrying worshippers to service. Bill Chambers remembers playing in it during the 1930's. "It stood behind the church, where part of the cemetery is now."

The cemetery was laid out in the spring of 1901 and given the formal name Twelve Mile Lake View Cemetery. (Several tombstones pre-date this, however - including one from 1877 - raising questions once again about the log church.) Eight graves were provided in each family plot which cost \$1.50.

The caretaker was paid \$7 a year. In January 1902, the graveyard was made free to members of the church, but "strangers" were charged \$1.50.

In 1921, four years before formal union, the congregation of Twelve Mile joined together with the Methodist congregation at Zion in Carnarvon and the little church by the lake was closed. For many years, until the funeral parlour opened in Minden, only funerals were held there. The graveyard continued to serve however, as it still does.

Bill Chambers is Treasurer of the Cemetery Board and possesses the record book which shows all the burials there, including his own great-grandparents. "Then, starting in the 1930's, a Mr. Workman of Toronto who knew about these things struck a deal with the community. In return for them building him a wharf at the head of Twelve Mile Lake, so he wouldn't have to deal with the bad roads to get to his country place, he made up a set of cards and a plan of the cemetery. That's what these records are based on. I keep it up to date now." In 1961, the Twelve Mile and Zion cemeteries were joined under one board.

But if there haven't been any funerals at Twelve Mile in a long time, there are still a couple of weddings every summer. It's hard to imagine a more idyllic spot than this, especially in the early evening as the setting sun reaches across the water and under the trees.

However, if you don't want to wait for someone to get married to experience the simple pleasures of the Twelve Mile church, you are welcome to take part in another of its happy traditions. Summer song services are held every Sunday evening during July at 7:30 p.m. and during August at 7:00 p.m. The services were begun many years ago by Ralph Hussey who was director of the Sunday School at Zion United and a music teacher in the local schools. He passed the job on to Clayton Rogers and, when Rogers died a dozen or so years ago, Elvin Johnson took on the responsibility.

"We don't usually have the hymns picked out," says Johnson. "We just sing whatever people are in the mood for. And the person in charge of the service gives a short message, maybe ten minutes long. We share it around."

Because there is no power in the church and, toward the end of the summer, the light starts to fade before the service is over, Johnson pulls his truck up to the window and shines the lights inside so everyone can still see the hymnbooks.

The services are informal, which is a blessing since the church fronts on one of the most popular public beaches in the area. "Sometimes we have people come to the door in their bathing suits," says Johnson, "not realizing there's a service going on. But we're happy to have them come in. It's not their clothes that are important."

The interior of the church matches the exterior: definitely 'plain cake'. Aside from the coal oil lamps and their reflectors hanging on the walls, there

are no decorations. The V-joint lumber on the walls has been lined up horizontally which works against the vertical life for the eye sought in most church construction. The bottom half of the walls is painted blue, the upper half yellow; the floor is painted grey. The wooden pews are varnished and a few stacking chairs at the back increase the seating. The wide centre aisle used to accommodate a wood stove.

Up at the front, the old harmonium

stands ready to accompany the hymns, though only three of the stops work. There is a narrow dais with a lectern and, on the floor in front of that, a small pulpit which Bill Chambers believes his grandfather William carved and is supposed to have come from the mythical log church. Definitely a house of worship thrifty Presbyterians would feel comfortable in. Definitely a place for people who value simple, time-honoured traditions.

To reach Twelve Mile United Church, turn west off Highway 35 at the Highlands Motel south of Carnarvon. Follow the road to the lake and turn right. Services are at 7:30 p.m. in July and 7:00 p.m. in August.