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Abandoned cemetery home of defunct religious sect

By JIM ROGERS
of the Potomac News

In the cool of an early summer evening as a pale, full moon strains to peek between branches of white oak trees, a breeze rustles through fallen leaves and a distant voice calls from the beyond:

"I'll be back. I'll be back. I'll be back."

Or perhaps it's just the rickety-tick-rickety-tick of crickets filling the night air with songs that stir the imagination of one who visits the Bacon Race Cemetery.

A Virginia legend was born here. It is the legend of the Rev. William Smoot who, on his death bed in 1938, told his parishioners that he would someday return to once again preach in the Bacon Race Meeting House.

Legend has it that Smoot's followers boarded up the old meeting house after the preacher died, vowing to keep it closed until their beloved minister fulfilled his deathbed promise.

Then on Dec. 25, 1987, the old church at the intersection of Bacon Race and Davis Ford roads collapsed. All that remains today is the cemetery where Smoot, his wife, and many of the church's former parishioners are laid to eternal rest.

Was it supernatural powers that brought the old wooden structure to the ground during the early morning hours that Christmas Day?

Was it the ghost of Smoot sending a message from beyond the grave?

Or was it simply the wind?

There are no historical markers to note the spot where Smoot's church once stood. There is only the legend as told by long-time residents of the county. And there are a few books and historical documents in the Virginia Room of Prince William's Central Library near Manassas that underscore the legend.

The first Bacon Race Meeting House

Places

"Rev. William Smoot cared for that building. He never intended for it to sit there without a preacher until it fell down."

Catherine Fair
former parishioner

was built sometime around the birth of the nation, said Don Wilson, who serves as the library's liaison to the Prince William County Historical Society.

Wilson has researched the origins of the church as well as the unusual name it bears.

In early 1986, a year before the structure's collapse, Wilson poured over old county records and found that a man named Samuel Jackson deeded the three-acre Bacon Race property to the Baptist Society in 1798.

The origin of the Occoquan-based Baptist Society, a now defunct fundamentalist sect, dates back to 1776.

The deed, dated May 12, 1798, describes the boundaries of the church property using landmarks such as "south side of the road by the meeting house" and "the road to Occoquan Mills," indicating that the church was on or near the site before this date.

Jack Ratcliff, a late local historian, estimated that the church had been in use since 1797, but another study showed the property had been used for a church since before 1794.

No one is certain what happened to the original structure. Old newspaper accounts tell of another meeting house



Courtesy of the Prince William County Library

The old Bacon Race Meeting House collapsed on Christmas Day in 1987.

being erected on the site sometime around 1880.

Some historians have suggested that the original structure may have been destroyed during the Civil War. Records show that the meeting house was used by Confederate Col. Wade Hampton in December 1862 and again in the spring of 1863 by Confederate Maj. S.D. Lee as a supply depot.

Smoot's tenure as pastor of the church didn't begin until the late 19th century, according to historical records.

Smoot was a well-educated man who was a strict fundamentalist Baptist. He often admonished his followers, known as Smootites, about the evils of the flesh and forbade them to conduct graveside funeral services.

As the legend goes, Elder Smoot on his death bed asked that no one else be allowed to preach in the old church until he returned to do so himself. His parishioners dutifully abided by the request and immediately boarded up the building — family pews, pulpit, altar and all.

But other accounts say the legend is

nothing more than poppycock. In 1987, a few days after the old building collapsed, former Smoot parishioners told the Potomac News that the tales of the preacher's death bed decree were absolute lies.

One former Smootite, Arthur Carter, said that he was among the church members who found Smoot dead in the preacher's Occoquan home, sitting in a chair, a Bible in his lap, glasses still perched upon his nose.

Another former parishioner, Catherine Fair, said of Smoot:

"I heard him say, as many times as I have fingers and toes, that God would bring a stronger preacher to follow in his footsteps.

"He cared for that building," she said. "He never intended for it to sit there without a preacher until it fell down."

Efforts to preserve the old structure as a historic landmark stopped when its weather-worn wooden frame finally crumbled. Now, about 200 graves can be found in the old cemetery.

Smoot's is prominent among them.

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