

# ***GULFHAVEN AND ITS HISTORY***

## **Missionary efforts and Promising farming opportunities are at our roots**

Hard times in the Midwest during the pioneer days of the early 1920s and the news of inexpensive land in the Gulf Coast of Mississippi caused several farming families to seek out a new future in the area that Gulfhaven Mennonite Church is now located. Also some of the seed from which the Gulfhaven area sprouted was sown in a sermon preached by John Brunk in Colorado. During this same time, he urged the church in Colorado to reach out to other areas and establish churches. Brunk and Samuel Stalter began to look for possible places to do this and advertisements of land selling in south Mississippi opened the door for a trip by Brunk and three others to investigate the area.

A number of family names make up the list of early settlers: Ross and Brunk from Colorado; Geil and Buckwalters from Kansas; and Hershey from Missouri. In April of 1921, David S. Geil moved and bought the first land. "Cut-over land" was selling for \$12.50 per acre. These families made up the nucleus of the Gulfhaven congregation. In 1930, the Simon Miller family and the Milford Miller family joined the group.

These were salt of the earth, God loving people who struggled through those early pioneer days. Clearing stumps that were as big as three feet in diameter from the cut virgin pine was the first major task. Worship was also an important part of their lives and soon what has become the Gulfhaven congregation began to gather. At the very beginning, they met with a small Methodist group at Finley where they had a Sunday School that met on Sunday afternoon.



*The Original One Room Church*

D. S. Geil bought four abandoned shacks in the community left from a lumber camp. He then moved them with ox teams to his land. Three of the buildings were used on his land and the fourth was converted into a church building until a new building was finished and dedicated on January 5, 1922.

The congregation consisted of twenty-eight adults and young people who were the charter members of the Gulfhaven Mennonite Church. The congregation was organized under the leadership of Bishop Andrew Shenk from Missouri; and John Brunk and J. B. Brunk were the first pastors of the church.

The original church building, which is still a part of our current facilities located on the north end was built with new lumber. Though there were good carpenters in the group, iron rods that are still visible today were used to pull in bulging walls. For several of those early years, Colman lamps hung from these rods to light the church building until the 1940s when electricity was available.

## **How we got our name**

After the one room church was dedicated, the question of what to name the church came up. Piney Woods and Gulfhaven were the two choices that were up for a vote for the church name. Piney Woods has an obvious origin because of all of the pine trees. Clara Geil and her daughter Maida Carr suggested the name of Gulfhaven. They said that the idea came as they stood in amazement at the Gulf of Mexico and thought of heaven. Clara and Maida put the Gulf and that

image together, forming our name today. Maida Pearl Carr, went home to be with the Lord on July 27, 2002, and was the last living charter member of our church.

Since there was no school in the area, the church building was also used for the children from 1922 to 1924 to attend school. A circular saw blade hung outside on the porch and was struck with a hammer to serve as the school bell.

Clarence Wayne Geil was the first baby born at Gulfhaven Mennonite Church. He was the son of David and Cora, the first settlers who came from Kansas. On March 25, 2002, Clarence went home to be with the Lord. He was Libby Geil's husband and Ronnie Geil's dad.

### **Trials and Triumphs**

The Church has persevered through difficult times and stands as a testimony and light today to the goodness and provision of a Sovereign God. Struggles from stump filled lands to mud roads led the way to innovation and change. Crop farmers raised and sold chickens to local grocers. A broom factory, started by a member of the group, helped several families make a living. Others went to town and learned new trades. The group was supportive of one another in many ways. Although hard times were part of the past, good times and blessing of the Lord mark the memories of the years now gone by.

The list of pastors goes like this: in 1921 John Brunk and J. B. Brunk with John serving through 1922 and J. B. till 1927. From 1922-1927, their father D. S. Brunk served along with his son, J. B. Also serving during 1922, was Daniel J. Brand as an interim pastor. From 1927 to 1990 the names of the pastors include Clarence Bontrager, Levi S. Yoder, Paul Hershey, Edward J. Miller, Paul Holdeman, Paul L. Yoder, Robert Yoder, Harry Diener, Lester Horst, Allen Zook, David Gobble, and Dean Swartzendruber. Lay-members during this time, Walter and Gladys Rutt, served in Jordan and Korea after their retirement. More recently, 1990 to 1999, David Kniss served as the first full-time pastor. Dave Weaver was licensed and ordained and has been serving as associate pastor since 1993. Paul Conrad was pastor from 2000 to 2003. Ed Miller served as interim pastor for seven months from the fall of 2003 to April 2004. Nelson and Pam Roth were called by the church in March and moved to Gulfport the end of April 2004. Ed Miller preached the charge and Nelson was installed as pastor in the Sunday service on April 25, 2004.

In 1946, Ed Miller made the first changes to the one room church building adding three Sunday School rooms and a library. An annex was finished in August of 1967 consisting of two Sunday School rooms, a kitchen, two indoor rest rooms and a pantry. In 1991, a fellowship center, and three more Sunday school rooms and larger rest room facilities were added. Then in 1996, the new sanctuary, four classrooms two offices, a library and two more restrooms were added.

### **History in the making**

That brings us up to where we are now; and the record has yet to be written as we **honor the past** of the interesting and wonderful people who blazed the trail before us. Today is a new day as we **challenge the present** and **look to the future**.

I want to thank those who helped me write this history; Gladys Rutt, though she has gone on to be with the Lord still contributes from her historical writings. Thanks also go to those in our church today, Betty Douple, Bernard and 'Sis' Hill, Esther Horst, Jerry and Peggy Geil, Libby Geil, Edna Moran, Oren and Dorothy Miller, Max and Mary Miller, and Sue Williams whose input was most helpful. Pastor Nelson