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"FORKS OF ILLINOIS MISSION"

from wooded crests of hills, one may look down upon a locality whose first settlers came more than 100 years ago. A vista of fields, farm houses, woodlands and groves extends from the western banks of the swift-flowing Barren Fork to near where towering white-boughed sycamores mark the course of the Illinois river. Near the western terminus of the locality, known to comparatively few, is the site of the oldest school in what is now a large and populous region of northeastern Oklahoma. Frequent mention has been made in recent years concerning the Dwight, Fairfield and Park Hill Missions. Practically nothing has been said about the Forks of Illinois mission, the principal reason being that this school was in operation for a period of five years only. Nevertheless there are existent some interesting facts in connection with it; some of them upon the written or printed page, others handed down from recollections of some who were numbered among pioneers of this section. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, early in the beginning of 1830, authorized Samuel Newton to construct necessary buildings

and to begin school work at a place which received the name of Forks of the Illinois. Without loss of time the buildings were constructed and a tract of agricultural land inclosed with nine-foot oak rails. At the beginning of autumn in the same year pupils were admitted and school begun. As he relates in letters to New England friends, Samuel Newton served as superintendent, as principal teacher and as farmer. Assisting him in the schoolroom was his wife. Forty pupils were enrolled in 1830 and this number was not decreased during the two succeeding years. In 1833 Mrs. Newton and Miss Ellen Stetson were teachers. There were 30 Indian pupils and 30 white.

All could write as well as read. Thirteen read the New Testament. There was a Sunday school. In 1835 Superintendent Newton was teaching, assisted by Miss Esther Smith and the lady who is referred to as Mrs. Joslyn. Besides attending to his duties at the mission, the superintendent preached in three other localities.

After many years of service in the missions, Miss Ellen Stetson died at Dwight. Her tombstone may be seen in the old burial ground there. Miss Esther Smith died at Fort Gibson in Civil War times and is buried in the United States National cemetery.

Mrs. Mary Newton, wife of the missionary, died at Forks of Illinois mission in March, 1835, and was buried there. Later in the year the Reverend Samuel Newton was married to Mrs. Sophia Joslyn.

Lush undergrowth, canebrakes, trees, stagnant water of low-lying bottom lands of the Illinois river, caused miasmatic conditions to prevail most of the year. There was much illness, a number of deaths. Eventually the board ordered the site abandoned and mission work continued in a higher location. The station was removed west of the Illinois, in the autumn of 1835. The old-time residents of Park Hill locality always credited Mr. Newton with having given the name Park Hill to the height south of the locality, in 1835.

The Reverend Samuel Worcester is referred to in printed records as assuming charge of Park Hill mission in December 1835, implying that the name was already in use. At the close of 1836 the Reverend Samuel A. Worcester assumed charge of the Park Hill mission and church, to remain until his death in April, 1850. At some period of the early 1840's, so far as is known the Reverend Samuel Newton and his wife removed to Cane Hill, Washington County, Arkansas.

Concerning the origin of the name, Forks of Illinois, there are two explanations. One is that the stream which received the name of Barren Fork in 1841, was before that date referred to as the fork or prong of the Illinois; although it is in reality a tributary instead of an offshoot. More plausible sounds the other explanation. Quite near the site of the pioneer mission is an old channel, which in periods of high water flows swiftly, but in time of dry weather is without water in its banks. This fork or prong of the river seems to have flown unobstructed for nearly a mile in by one time. Between it and the river proper is a tract of the vily timbered bottom land. This prong united with the Illinois nearly a half-mile northwest of the confluence of the so-called fork with the larger stream.

A record-breaking drought in the summer and fall of 1841 caused vegetation and foliage of trees along the banks of the "fork" to wither, to become sere and brown. It was as though killing frosts of autumn had prevailed. The scene was desolate. One could ride or drive on the dry bed of the stream from source to mouth. Therefore the name, Barren fork of the Illinois became the designation of the lowest tributary of the Illinois.

The name has ever since been retained but is occasionally spelled Barron or Baron Fork:

Slight vestiges remain to remind the visitor of the site of the mission established 103 years ago, but in a setting of primordial forest trees, stand most of the buildings of a similar institution which was founded during somewhat later decades of the Cherokee nation in Indian Territory.

The American Board permanently withdrew from missionary activities among the Cherokees in 1860. Among factors contributing to this action were disruptive tendencies of the approaching Civil War. And, too, the Cherokee national public schools and high schools were in operation, in consequence of which the board felt that it was no longer necessary to maintain missions and teachers in the Indian nation.

NOTE

The writer secured this information from remembered statements of such early day people as Judge Riley Keys, and from some notes on the work of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign missions collected by S. W. Ross of Tahlequah.--Elizabeth Ross.