

POTTLUCK





Not all congregations of churchgoers around the world agree on everything. In fact, they don't agree on most things. Throughout the centuries, divisions have been made and camps have been set up with each side unwilling to budge. But one common thread unites them all: the red and white checkered tablecloth of a Sunday potluck.

Church potlucks are unique in that you never quite know what you're going to find until you arrive. Each person brings something different to the table. All kinds of different dishes, made with their own flavors and secret recipes handed down through the generations, complete a spread of food that gathers people from miles around.

A country church is like a potluck. You never know what you're going to get until you show up. Just like a potluck has many different types of food, these churches are made in the same way: with all kinds of unique people each with their own stories to share.

The church potluck is so much more than simply a place to share a meal or visit with close friends. It is the center of whole communities around which some people will spend their entire lives.

ALGOA

The town of Algoa is situated about 45 miles northeast of Searcy near the Cache River on Arkansas State Highway 37. With a population of approximately 80 citizens, Algoa is composed almost entirely of crop fields. In the fall and winter months, the waterfowl that make Arkansas a destination for hunters in pursuit of ducks and geese flock to the fields in and around Algoa.







BOBBY COMBS

Bobby Combs has been a member at the Algoa Church of Christ for about 30 years. He and his wife, Henrietta, attend the church because she is originally from Algoa. When we asked Combs what he loved most about his congregation, he replied, "The giving spirit that they have if someone truly needs help here, we try to do everything we can for them. And I think that's part of our work as God's people."

Combs served in the U.S. Army for three years immediately after graduating high school. He served in Louisiana, New Jersey and Germany, and he credits those years of service for making a man out of him. He met Etta shortly after returning to Arkansas, and they married after dating for three months. She won him over and converted him to Christianity, and they have been married for 46 years now. Combs worked at a factory in Newport for 37 years to support his family until the factory shut down, at which time he found work at a factory in Batesville. He worked in Bates-

ville until he lost his eyesight.

Bobby Combs has more right to complain than most, but he does not. He spoke candidly during our interview about his blindness: "I've had five surgeries on my eyes, and I finally just gave up. For the first year, you don't know how many times I thought about ending my life. Everything changes but I had one person on my side all the time, and that's God. He's never left me." Combs said the Algoa congregation helped him through that difficult period by treating him the same way they always had, and that was what he needed more than anything. He has been blind for eleven years now, and his story of faith and recovered joy is truly inspiring.

"You know, I've been blessed, and I know that sounds crazy with my medical faults. It's hard to see that I'm blessed, but I am. I've been a blessed man. That's one thing that nobody can take away from me. God gave it to me, and as long as he's God, I hope he keeps on blessing me."

"Everything changes but I had one person on my side all the time, and that's God."

HENRIETTA AND NANCY

Henrietta Combs and Nancy King are sisters who grew up in the Algoa area and have attended the Algoa Church of Christ since childhood. Henrietta's husband, Bobby, worked in a nearby factory for 30 years while Nancy's husband works in the local post office. Bobby served in our country's armed forces. Nancy and her husband lived in Germany during his tour of duty, but Bobby and Etta were not married at the time of his tour. All four of them proudly

claim Algoa as their childhood home.

The sisters have remained faithful members of the Algoa congregation for so long because, for them, it bears many of the comforts of home. "It's very homey," Combs said. "Everybody knows everybody; everybody loves everybody. We just don't have tension, and that's good. That's a good feeling."

"Everybody loves everybody."





BANNER

Just a spattering of homes and farms on Highway 87 make up the town of Banner, Arkansas. Banner is located in Cleburne County whose slogan reads, "Where the mountains meet the lake and river." The county is the youngest in the state, and the town of Banner is not even listed on its website, making the breathtaking rural countryside scenery one of Arkansas' best-kept secrets.



RICKY AND SISSY TREAT

When asked to describe a Sunday morning service at the Banner Church of Christ in one word, Ricky and Sissy Treat replied simultaneously: "Family."

Although living 127 miles away in Little Rock, the Treats drive to Banner each week and stay in the church-owned house next door. Ricky preaches each Sunday to between 25 and 35 members and cannot imagine do anything else.

"There's nothing I can see myself doing outside of this church that would be more important," Ricky said.

The Jennings family started the Banner Church of Christ over a century ago. Mary Jennings, referred to as the "mother of the church," has been a member for over 89 years. Ricky and Sissy Treat both believe communication is key to the success of the congregation, and communication is something they do well.

"Everybody knows each other," Ricky said. "The

men of the church meet and talk, and we don't get mad. Every month we visit. We keep everything out in the open."

While communication flourishes, oftentimes mobility poses a challenge.

"The membership is elderly, so getting out in the community is difficult" explained Sissy. "We need young people."

A large portion of the church family works as chicken farmers, but the current decline in the industry has taken its toll on the area. Regardless of the difficult circumstances, the Treats dream of a vibrant future for the church and the community, echoing past times of strength and vitality.

"These scattered churches are the lifeblood of the community," Sissy said. "The lifeblood spreads with the Bible."

Ricky agreed with his wife and smiled. "The community of this church means my soul."

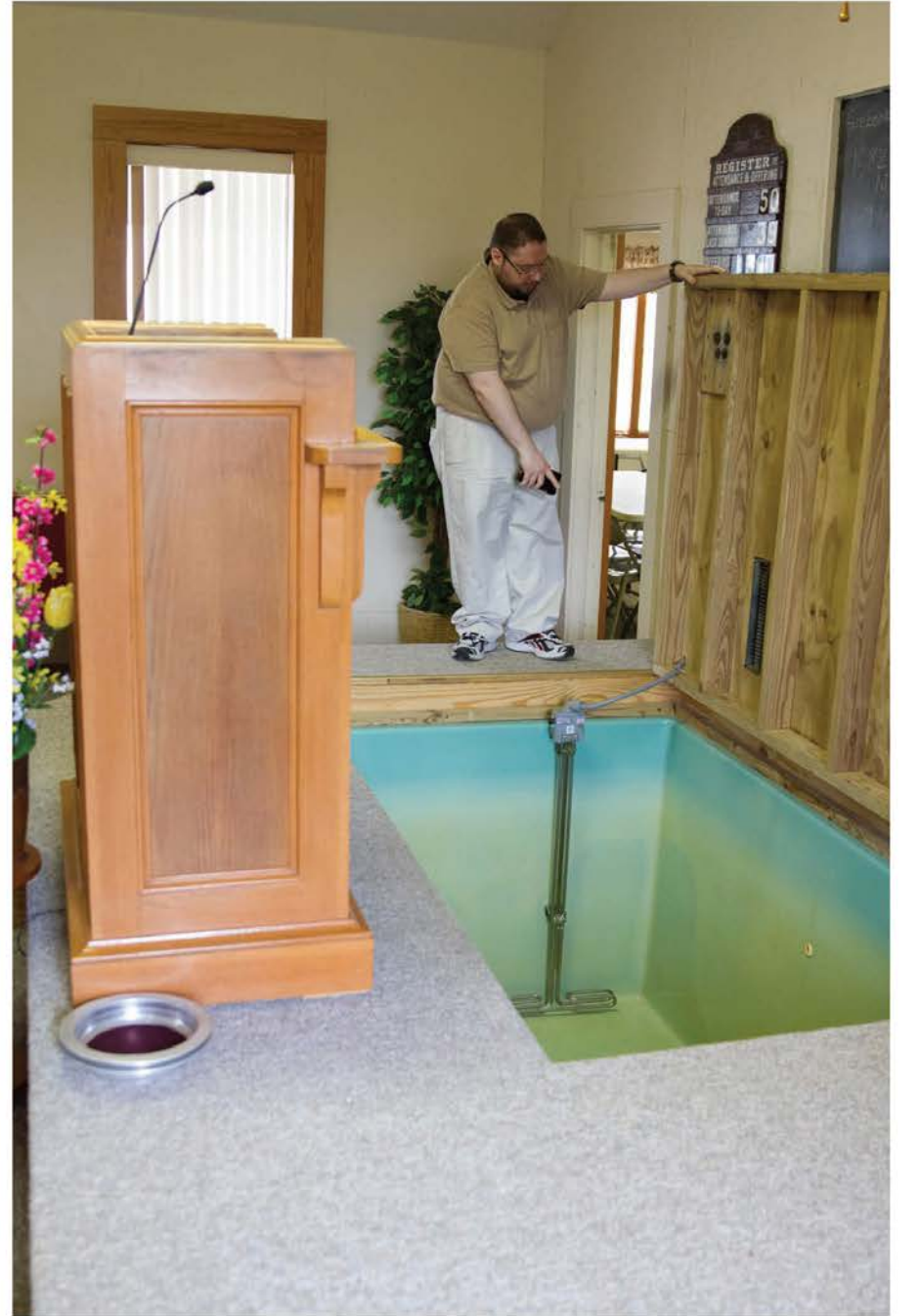


"It's like the air you breathe. It's life."

PANGBURN

The 383 acres that make up Pangburn, Arkansas are home to just over 600 people. The first white settlers floated up the Little Red River and arrived in 1817. The city originally consisted of a couple general stores and a community church. Today the Little Red still serves as a top trout fishing destination and on occasion, a baptistry for the Pangburn Church of Christ.







ZEB AND ZEPHI BIDDLE

For Zeb Biddle, church is simple:
“Everyone is nice.”

His audacious older sister, Zephi, wrapped a loving arm around his shoulders as she explained, “Everybody here is nice. It’s small. It doesn’t feel crowded. It’s just a friendly church.”

The 8-year-old adjusted her purple glasses. “I

like the sermons because I like learning about God’s word,” she said thoughtfully. “In Sunday school I like to learn about practically anything.”

In the future, Zephi dreams of owning her own bakery and restaurant. But until then, wrangling her 5-year-old brother while her father, Scott Biddle, preaches at the Pangburn Church of Christ keeps her busy enough.

“It’s just a friendly church.”

MIKE HAWLEY

Mike Hawley was born at a hospital in what is now a parking lot at Harding University in Searcy. He graduated from Harding in 1986, and he predicts he will retire at the Harding Place retirement center. So what is Mike Hawley doing at the Pangburn Church of Christ?

"It's home," said Hawley.

Hawley's mother was a member of the church, and Hawley's father, although not a consistent attendee through his growing up years, was the first person baptized in the church's new baptistry at the age of 85. The nearby Little Red River had served as the baptistry for decades until the new one was completed.

The congregation was established in 1907

by a traveling preacher who arrived on train or horseback, according to local legend. A disagreement split the church in the 1950s, and attendance dropped to below 20 in the following decades. Mike Hawley believed it was a "succession of hardworking preachers" that helped rebuild the church family. Today the pews are packed each Sunday with 40-50 people.

"Now the church family is real close. Everybody chips in and cooperates. It's kind've like the church of Christ in Mayberry probably," Hawley said with a chuckle. "Everybody knows everybody. If somebody's sick, they're checking on somebody. If something good happens, everybody knows."

"It's home."



ROSE BUD

With a population of just about 500, Rose Bud looks like just another drive-thru town in the foothills region of Arkansas. This community has come a long way in the past few decades though. After being completely destroyed by a tornado in 1982, Rose Bud has rebuilt its buildings and its people have grown closer than ever, giving the word "family" a whole new meaning.







CARL ROGERS

Carl Rogers is no stranger to Rose Bud and the surrounding area; he lived in the house he was born in until he got married, after all. Originally from Romance, Arkansas, he and his wife moved across the state for a while but eventually found their way back to rural White County in 1975. The deciding factor for moving back was heavily attached to their children.

"We did not want our children growing up around drugs," Rogers said. "So we brought them back here."

Though the church was small, only about 20 people, Carl continued to stay heavily involved. Rodger says he goes to church because he is called to assemble with fellow Christians, it is the right thing to do.

"By doing the right thing, I set a good example," Rogers said. "To be an example, you have to be there every time."

The church at Rose Bud is out of the norm by society standards, there is no gossip. And though Rogers says people won't believe that, he stands by his view.

"I know everybody and you feel so close to everybody," Rogers said. "There is no gossip and some may say that isn't possible. But we love each other."

Rogers believes love and devotion are the prevailing traits of the church at Rose Bud. He says just like a conversation takes two people, so does love.

"To feel love from people, you also have to show it."

CLAY SMITH

Originally from Nashville, Tennessee, Clay Smith just happened upon the church at Rose Bud.

After spending three years in Arkansas studying Bible and religion at Harding University in Searcy, Clay wanted a little more out of his church experience. He grew up in a 600+ person congregation in Nashville but wanted to step out of his comfort zone and be a part of a smaller, but just as meaningful, body of believers.

As an aspiring preacher, Clay wanted to gain experience in teaching and leading a church.

"I really wanted to be involved in the life of a church," Smith said. "They were family from the very beginning."

After worshipping at Rose Bud for a year, the church offered Clay an associate minister position and of course he accepted.

Clay believes the smallness of Rose Bud is actually one of its biggest blessings. The size has allowed the congregation to stay intimately connected with one another, a characteristic that may not be possible at a larger church.

"We go back because, beyond experiences and the involvement we have, I have never been a part of a church before that feels so much like a family," Smith said. "They love us and give so much for us."

Sometimes it's hard to get motivated to go out to smaller churches but the family, in the end, is the driving force that makes it all worth it.

"We know everything about everyone, Smith said. "We know about people's pasts. We have people who are not afraid to discuss difficult things and are not going to ostracize others if they disagree with them. And that's what a family does; they love even when it's difficult."



"They were family from the very beginning."



SHARON PHILLIPS

The church at Rose Bud is no stranger to Sharon Phillips. Her parents began attending in the 1970's and have long since had strong ties to it and the community it is a part of.

"We are a family," Phillips said. "It is just like a family."

There is a sense of everyone caring for each other in the community. There are several different churches and denominations in Rose Bud but if there is any sort of tragedy, the whole town shows up. Phillips says all of the congregations rally around a common goal, Rose Bud.

"We all try to share the load of the community," Phillips said. "We love our town."

And Rose Bud has not been spared hardships. In 1982, a tornado and the church building that held so many memories for Sharon Phillips along with it destroyed the entire town. The only thing remaining was the church bell on its stand.

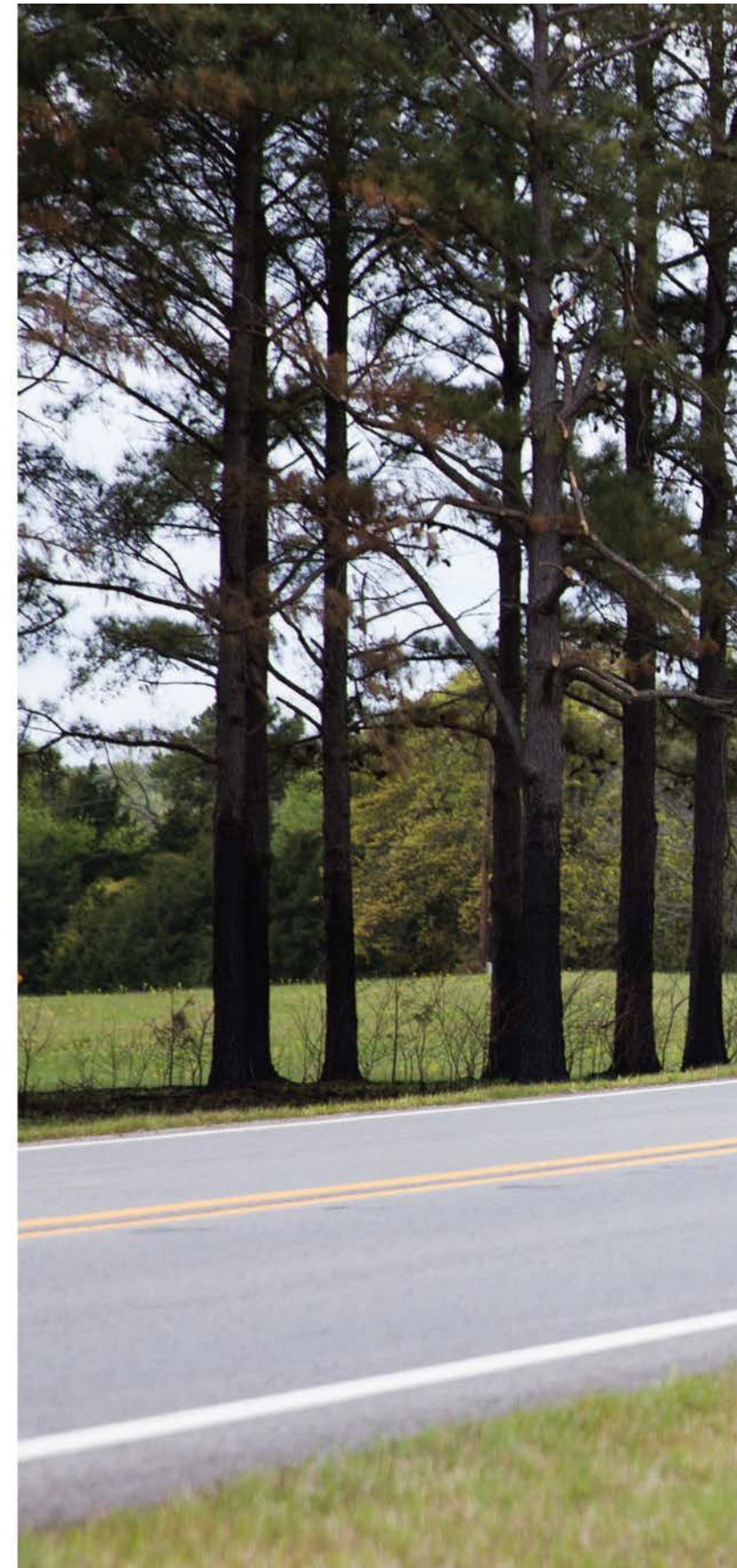
Today, that bell marks the growth that has been made and the community that has survived. Sharon's husband, Don, serves as an elder for the Rose Bud church but she does not see herself as what some might think of an elder's wife as.

"I don't try to be an elder's wife. We are not any different, we're just servants," Phillips said. "So I try to serve."

"We are a family."

ROMANCE

The only claim to fame Romance seems to have is its name. Every year on Valentine's Day the Romance post office is flooded with thousands of letters to be postmarked from this town of love. Just like its name implies, the town's people love one another unconditionally.







FRAN GOSS AND GEORGIA ROGERS

After retiring from teaching art and design in North Little Rock and moving to rural White County, Fran Goss and her husband, Gary, found the church at Romance. Twelve years later they count it as one of their biggest blessings.

"Heartfelt" is how Fran would describe her church.

Just like larger congregations, the church at Romance has not been without divisions. Arguments have arisen but just like a family, the church works through the hard times. But through church splits and construction problems the Romance church as

stayed strong with their center on what matters most.

"The friendliness, the unity, the acceptance are our greatest strengths. This is the most non-judgmental church I have ever seen. We are very much a family."

Nancy said there is plenty of room in the church for more; no one is turned away.

"We try our best to make everyone feel welcome," Rogers said. It means a lot to the strangers that we do try to make them feel a part."

"Heartfelt."

STEPROCK

The community of Steprock is situated about ten miles north of Searcy on highway 385. There are no restaurants, schools or retail stores in Steprock, but several families operate sizable cattle operations. Steprock used to have its own Post Office, but it was shut down years ago. Many residents gather for Sunday morning services at the Steprock Church of Christ, one of the oldest Church of Christ in White County.





JACKIE STEWART

Jackie Stewart began attending services at the Steprock Church of Christ in 1953 at the age of three when his parents moved to Steprock from Kokomo, Indiana after purchasing the old Steprock Post Office. He grew up in Steprock and attended Harding University. After graduating from Harding, Stewart enjoyed a long career as a history teacher and boys' athletics coach at White County Central Schools.

Stewart actually lives closer to Bethel Grove Church of Christ, another congregation between Steprock and Searcy. When we asked why he comes to Steprock every Sunday, he said, "This is where I've grown up. We live on the same land we lived on when I was born. We're probably a little closer to Bethel Grove, but this is just where I grew up and where I always went to church." The strongest aspect of the congregation at Steprock

is the closeness of the church family, according to Stewart. Everyone rejoices and endures hardships together. This friendliness is not limited to the Sunday regulars, either. The three of us were greeted warmly and made to feel very at home during our visit.

When asked to describe Sunday morning service at the Steprock Church of Christ in one word, Stewart responded, "Fellowship." He and his family have endured some difficult and tragic times with the help of their Steprock church family. They lost their son, Jamie, at an early age. In Jackie's words, "Our younger son came down with Hodgkin's Disease when he was a student at Harding. When we were suffering with losing Jamie, they were right there with us. We knew they cared. I guess I come back to the word family. This is part of my family."

"We knew they cared."



