

Joseph Smith  
by Pauline Binkley Cheek, May 14, 1986

The Rev. Dr. Joseph Smith was born in 1903 in Dillsboro, N. C., but since childhood has made Sylva his home. There as a youth he did farm chores, attended a one-teacher school, and participated in Church activities. From his grandfather, who lived with him until his death at age 97, Dr. Smith heard first-hand accounts of the Civil War and of the laying of the railroad track from Asheville to Brevard. From this man whose name he bears Dr. Smith also acquired a life-long love of music and was led toward commitment to the Lord.

While living in the home of the Rev. Wilson of Brevard, Dr. Smith dedicated himself to the ministry and began a serious study of the Scriptures which continues to the present. The Rev. Wilson not only conducted his ordination service but also performed the wedding ceremony for him and Cerilda Hampton. The couple has one daughter, Marjorie Smith Herbert, and four grandchildren.

In 1928 Dr. Smith accepted a call from Mt. Olive Church in Mars Hill. In addition, he has ministered to congregations at Waynesville, Sylva, Brevard, and Lake Lure. "The Lord expects us to put Him first in everything," he says, and he counsels his community to do likewise. Like the apostle Paul Dr. Smith has used manual labor in Christian service, learning carpentry skills in order to help repair or rebuild several church houses, including three at Sylva and, in 1950, Mt. Olive.

"The Lord hath His own time" has been a precept for his life. "My prayers," he says, "have been in that direction that I would wait for the Lord's time." Many changes have occurred in American society over the past 58 years, including economic depression, World War II, the migration of Southerners to Northern cities, Civil Rights legislation. During these events Dr. Smith has provided encouragement to families in distress, has set an example of Christian brotherhood, and has led his congregations to support Baptist programs both at home and abroad. Furthermore, he has acted as peacemaker. "We have never had a fuss or falling out," he says of his community, and the Mt. Olive choir is a force for reconciliation throughout the region. Mt. Olive contributes generously to Shaw University, and three years ago this institution conferred upon the Rev. Smith an honorary doctorate. Of him it will surely be said, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

"Somebody's Prayers Must Have Been Answered"  
by Pauline Binkley Cheek, September 4, 1986

Among the ex-slaves whose axes hacked the railroad bed from Asheville to Murphy was a young man by the name of Joseph Smith. Grueling though this task was, comments the grandson with whom he made his home until his death at age 97, it proved to him that he could work for pay. Previously he had worked without remuneration for the Smiths of Charlotte, to whom he had been given by a Gregory from near Wilmington.

Born in Dillsboro in 1903, the Rev. Joseph Smith remembers his grandfather's singing hymns and talking without rancor "about back in slavery and fighting for our freedom." For example, Rev. Smith tells this anecdote: "He secured enough bits of wool for someone to weave him a suit, but a soldier rose up over the fence and snatched it off the line where it was hanging to dry. 'Hey, Mister, that's MY SUIT,' he said. 'No it isn't. It's a Rebel suit,' said the soldier, and he rode off with it."

Of his own youth Rev. Smith recalls his teacher, Monnie Flack, in a one-room school on Scott's Creek a mile from Sylva and the constant work required of sharecroppers raising corn. After his father left, he and his mother, Betsy Love, made their home with an uncle in Sylva who had married the daughter of the Rev. Anderson H. Wilson of Brevard. The church, he says, provided their social life, and religion pervaded the home. When his grandfather "was so afraid I'd just flop he talked it over with Rev. Wilson and said he prayed that it would be so with the Lord that I would feel the urge to preach."

Rev. Wilson, "a <sup>fine</sup> fine old minister of the Gospel," Smith explains, attracted a group of young men who accompanied him in his duties as pastor. Recounting the eight years he lived with Wilson, Smith comments, "When we boys sat down at the table it was none of the hee-hee, haw-haw. He would tell us to get out our Bibles and look up passages and answer questions. That gave us a good fellowship for study. And somebody's prayers must have been answered, because I fell under the conviction."

Having been ordained by the church in Brevard, Smith accepted a call to Yancey County and then, in 1928, to Mt. Olive in Mars Hill, where he had preached his first sermon at age 17. "I was eleven," says Mrs. Gustie Ray, "and I remember it well--people commenting on what a fine sermon and what a fine young man." Also in the congregation was Cerilda Hampton, whom he baptized and who became his wife.

For a pastor's family, Mrs. Smith observes, "there are new experiences all the time. I was fortunate, for I learned early to make changes and adjust easily. We had to tell our daughter there were certain places she couldn't go. She says it was a little hard back when she was a girl, but she is grateful now for her Christian home." Their daughter, Mrs. Marjorie Herbert, graduated from Allen High School in Asheville and Bennett College, worked as medical librarian while her husband earned a degree in social work at Ohio State, and now, the mother of four children, resides in St. Charles, Missouri.

For 54 years Smith divided his time between Mt. Olive and Sylva's Liberty Baptist. Like the apostle Paul he used manual labor in Christian service, learning carpentry skills in order to renovate private homes and church houses. At Sylva he first shored up a dilapidated structure, but soon water from a viaduct began pouring through the ceiling. No sooner had a new building been constructed than tragedy struck again: "There had been a funeral, and we had just committed the body when someone drove up and cried, 'The church is on fire!' When we got there the roof had already fallen in. The Fire Department got the hose pipe to the creek, but the hose collapsed....Then the water froze....So we had to build back," a brick structure depicted on a plate in the Smith home.

Such acceptance of circumstances reflects his life's precept: "'The Lord hath His own time.' When people ask me how come I managed to stay with the same churches so long I ask them, 'How come you're such a limber--like a bird hopping from limb to limb?' My ambition has never been the dollar-more church. And my prayers have always been that I would wait for the Lord's time."

His success is confirmed by Manual Briscoe, for over thirty years deacon, choir director, and employee of the town of Mars Hill. Of Smith, Briscoe said: He never accepted a salary, and he was just as happy with \$15.00 or a candy-roaster and corn from the garden as he would have been with \$75. He LIVED his Christian religion, and he expected us to do the same."

When asked to comment on the numerous changes that occurred in American society during the 58 years of his ministry, Rev. Smith emphasizes his role as peacemaker. Before school integration, for example, he declined an Asheville lawyer's offer of help for staging a demonstration. "I always came down on the side with those who were going along," he says. "I kept my eye on the thermometer to see people's temperature, and we got along fine....never had no fuss and no falling out."

Of major concern for him, however, have been the need for adequate housing and the outmigration of blacks seeking employment. "The first I noticed of them leaving out for the cities," he notes, "was for the CCC camps under Roosevelt. Then when things picked up, the young people went to get jobs in Detroit, Philadelphia, New Jersey. They had relatives there or went to big plants."

"Most black men worked in a tannery here," Mrs. Smith elaborates, "but then it closed. Mead hired only one or two blacks as mail boys or janitors. Housing was bad, but now, thank goodness, there is low-income housing and the government has appropriated funds to make homes meet standards.

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“It’s been bothering me,” she admits: “Will the church have to close? What’s left is just a very few people, most around my age....Ten or twelve years from now they won’t be here, and there are no young people to take their place.” With nostalgia the Smiths recall days when people, starved for company as they sharecropped on isolated farms, welcomed with “weeping and praising the Lord” the joy of coming to church on Sunday. Revivals, the return of members who have moved away, associational meetings, homecoming, exchange visits with a church in Morristown, Tennessee--these are still occasions for celebration with covered-dish meals.

On June 1, 1986, the Smiths were honored with a retirement dinner at Mars Hill College. although still on call for funerals and preaching engagements, he now has more time for gardening and reading, and despite glaucoma she enjoys numerous crafts, including a lace-overlay quilt for their first great grandchild. Mementoes grace their home: a painting, for example, of the oldest living Eskimo woman, presented to them when he was asked by a Sylva native to preach in Anchorage, Alaska. With awe in his voice Smith tells of his earlier trip to Expo ‘70 in Tokyo and return via the Holy Land: “Something tingles in you in that land where the Master walked.”

In 1982 Shaw University bestowed an honorary doctorate upon this man of God whose only claim is, “The Lord expects us to put Him first in everything, and that’s what I’ve tried to do.”