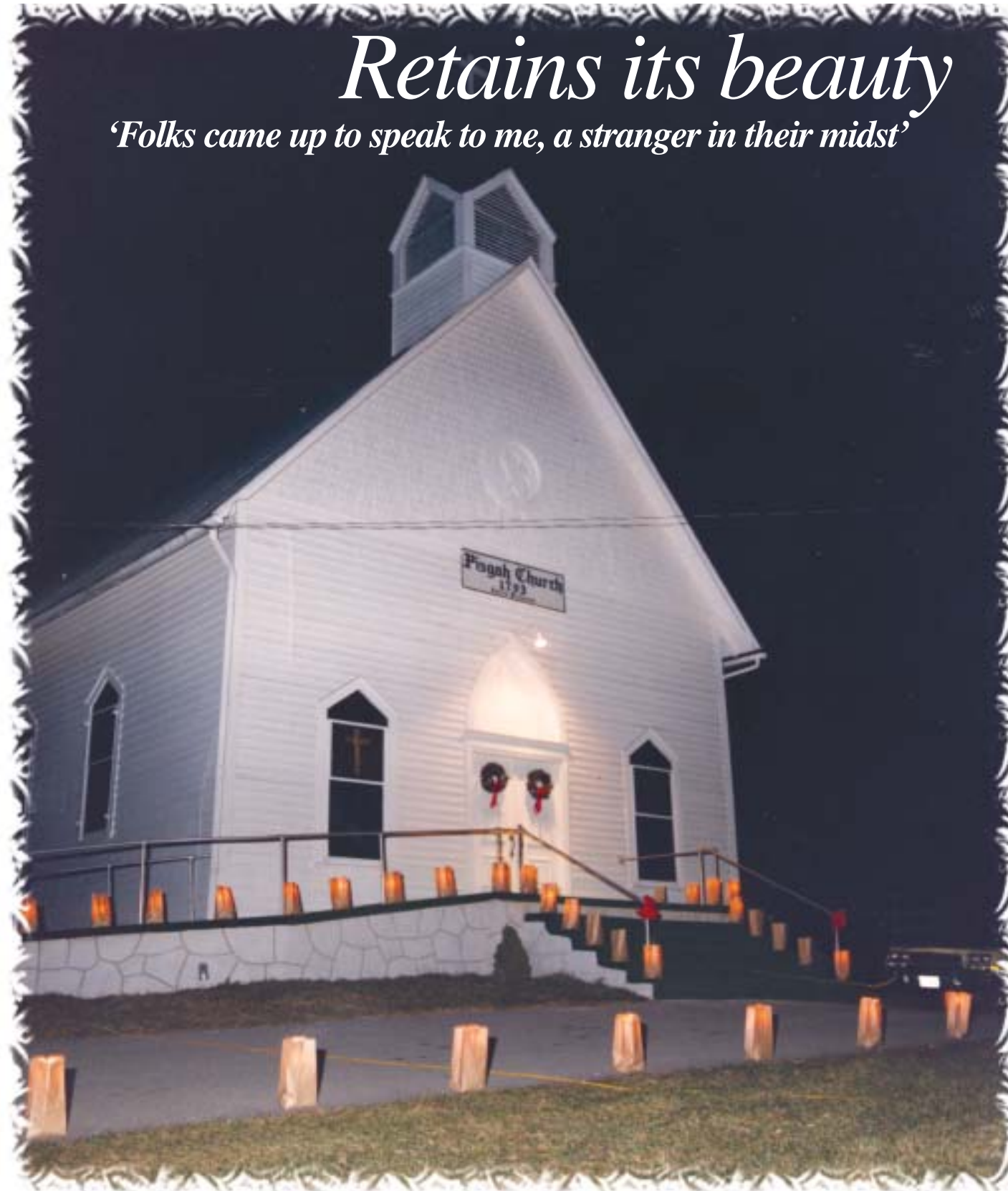


Season after Season, Pisgah Church

Retains its beauty

'Folks came up to speak to me, a stranger in their midst'



If you stand at the foot of the altar in Pisgah United Methodist Church, look through the vestibule and out the front door, you can see clear across Crab Orchard and Witten's Fort, past the bluegrass fields all the way to Clinch Mountain. The fact that the altar is in direct line with this vista creates the feeling that the church, the land, and God are one.

In his book "Pisgah United Methodist Church: Two Centuries of Faith 1793-1993," Dr. Terry Mullins quotes the famous evangelist Billy Sunday: "I believe that if the angel Gabriel were to jump out of Heaven and seek a more beautiful country, he would land in Tazewell County." In 1940, a *Clinch Valley News* reporter wrote that Pisgah is in "a setting so beautiful as to be suggestive of the poet's vision of a lane into heaven."

By **Carol Hart**
Roanoke.com columnist

Historic Pisgah Church is as divine as the limestone-fissured fields that surround it. Its simple beauty evokes the poet in everyone who passes by. Mullins quotes from an article written by Goodson Wilson: "I kept on [driving] to Pisgah Church whose building and setting had frequently held my admiring attention. Pisgah Church is an architectural gem placed in a setting of great beauty."

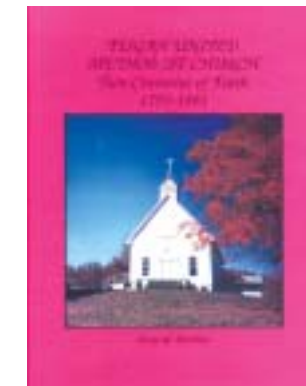
Pisgah's beauty is in its simple lines. The steep-pitched roof forms a Gothic arch over the front door, an arch that repeats itself over the wide, tall windows. The sharp roof line draws your eyes upward to the steeple that ends with a cross touching the sky. Something about the white wood and green fields and blue heavens point to a purity that says you can surely find the voice of God here.

The little white church may not have gold and silver candelabras, vaulted ceilings, religious frescoes, marble floors, and richly embroidered altar coverings, but it is a national historical treasure. It's the oldest church in Tazewell County and rests on a site occupied by American Indians as long ago as 800 A.D. It was later settled by the first pioneers in the county. The church is clearly visible from its knoll located on U.S. 460 two miles west of the town of Tazewell.

That's where Wilson, the reporter, saw it and stopped in to worship. "It was a good old-fashioned Sunday school and staying through it did me good. When it was over folks came up to speak to me, a stranger in their midst," he wrote. Like Wilson and others, I too was drawn to the beauty

and comfort that the church exudes. On a clear October morning, invited by Terry and Irene Mullins, I visited the church.

Inside the people were seated in the pews, catching up on news, talking church business, or sitting quietly waiting for the service to begin. They were a democratic bunch, coming from all walks of life. They were farmers, homemakers, teachers, lawyers, administrators, secretaries, nurses, business owners, or salespeople. They were toddlers, school-aged, middle-aged, retired and elderly.



When Lay Leader Donnie Yates rose to start the fast-moving service, the people turned from talking to each other to talk to him. Tazewell High School's band had won a high rating at a competition. The football team hadn't fared as well on Friday night. They shared their joys and sorrows. They sang "Happy Birthday," "I'll Fly Away," and "There's Something About That Name." A lot of people tapped their toes and clapped their hands to the energetic music.

Leading the music were Joe Boyd on piano and Phyllis Davidson on the organ. Davidson says she plays by ear but can read some notes thanks to Boyd, a trained pianist. Both work with the choir, and Davidson works with the children. She led them in singing "Jesus Loves Me." Then it was the Rev. Jared Wood's turn to talk about faith, love and duty.

Before I knew it, the acolytes were snuffing out the candles and the children were running into the sanctuary to find their parents. Another Sunday at Pisgah had ended. I can echo the words that Wilson wrote in so many years ago, "When it was over folks came up to speak to me, a stranger in their midst."

I left with a bonus too – a jar of homemade vegetable soup. It was left over from Pisgah's annual Lord's Acre Sale that raises money for repairs, projects and missions. Outside, behind the church, Mullins showed me the Clinch River where they hold baptisms.

For 200 years Pisgah Church has joined people and God with the beauty and fruit of the earth. ■

► Carol Hart is a retired teacher who lives in Bluefield, Va.
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■ Pisgah in summer

Photos courtesy of Terry Mullins & Pisgah UMC



■ Pisgah in winter

■ Pisgah in 2002

Thriving with time-honored traditions

Two years ago, Pisgah UMC's worship attendance had dropped down to the 40s. Today, the Tazewell District church is thriving again with a busy activity schedule that often includes its sister church, Pleasant Hill UMC. Pisgah now averages 90 in worship attendance; Pleasant Hill averages 50.

"It sounds cliché, but I think [Pisgah] is growing because they're such a loving group of people," said the Rev. Jared Wood, pastor to both Pisgah and Pleasant Hill. The two congregations "just love to do things together. Bake sales, Lord's Acre Sales, cookouts – they even share youth functions." This January the youth group will perform at Resurrection, representing the Tazewell District with a mime act in the Festival of Gifts and Talents.

Wood grew up in Tazewell at Main Street UMC and says he enjoys serving his first appointment in his hometown. He is married to Tanya Wood, an environmental student at Southwest Virginia Community College. – Annette Bender ■



▲ Rev. Jared and Tanya Wood, with pets August and Simoné