

Written In Stone

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Little Brown Church

Whenever someone speaks of the old hymnal, “The Little Brown Church in the Vale”, I am now reminded of my aunt who wanted to take me to see the one she remembered from her childhood. The song is one that reminds us of attending the church of our childhood, the bells ringing, and going home to the heavenly reward that calls us from the time of our birth.

The song was written in 1857 by William S. Pitts, a young music teacher traveling by stagecoach from Wisconsin to Iowa to visit his betrothed. While waiting for the coach to arrive, he took a walk down Cedar Street around Bradford, Iowa, and being of a romantic nature, thought what a charming setting the spot would make for a church. Returning home, he wrote the poem, “Church in the Wildwood,” and later set it to music. The song, forgotten, lay in a drawer, till years later, when he and his wife returned to Iowa to be near her parents, he taught singing school at Bradford Academy. He returned to the spot and discovered the people of the community had indeed built a church, nestled in the wildwood, painted brown. Mr. Pitts taught the song to his class who sang it for the dedication service of the church.

In Butler County, there is a cemetery at the site of an old ‘Little Brown Church’ where many of the earlier settlers to the area are buried. A census of the cemetery was taken in January 2000, with the earliest known grave to be that of Ruth Naomi Gardner, who was born in 1927 and died in 1928; her epitaph reads “Suffer the little children to come unto me”. Others were of the Calloway and Campbell families, as well, as Bush, Kendrick, Owen, Skipper and Smith families who lived in the close-knit communities of Butler County.

For years, Marie Kendrick Pugh spoke of taking me to the site of the old church and cemetery, because she knew of my love for the old places. Well, we didn’t go, and now, Aunt Marie has been called to her heavenly reward, and I am left here to tell the stories of these old, sometimes forgotten cemeteries where our loved ones are buried. I am left singing, ‘there’s a church in the valley by the wildwood, no lovelier spot in the dale; no place is so dear to my childhood, as the little brown church in the vale.’