

World Class VBS Worker

By Lowell Snow

When a child asks for a second snow cone at one Vacation Bible School, in rural Arkansas, it's no problem. "They're supposed to bring back their cup and spoon if they want seconds." Says 93 year old VBS veteran, Emma Mae New. "Of course most of them don't," she admits with a chuckle and mischievous smile. 'Ms. Peg', as she is called, doesn't mind. Maybe that's because some of the children she serves are the great grandchildren of the preschoolers she first taught in this same Vacation Bible School, sixty years ago.

The Arkansas legislature has recorded her achievement for posterity, but she's not looking for glory. It might even be a world record, but Ms Peg doesn't think about such things. She's just doing her part to share Jesus with the children of her community, and she remembers when things were "very different."

She should. She's worked in every VBS since her church started having it in 1946. **That's 60 consecutive years, counting this summer (2005), in the same VBS! She hasn't missed a one.** She was the principal for several years, but mostly she taught in the children's classes. Now she helps with refreshments, takes the dishtowels home for washing, and visits with the "little chaps" enjoying their snow cones.



You can add one more to her total. In 1986, at the age of 75, she traveled several hundred miles by bus to participate in the church's first mission VBS.

Mrs. New has remained in the small southern Arkansas community of Three Creeks all of her life and lives less than two miles from where she was born and raised. Saved at the age of 14 during the annual summer revival, she was baptized in the Three Creeks swimmin' hole (yes, there are three creeks in Three Creeks) and became a member of the Three Creeks Baptist Church.

She has been an active member ever since, but this country church was dear to her heart even before she was saved. Her mother died when she was nine and relatives from another community wanted to take her in, but she says, "I wanted to stay with my Daddy." The ladies of this church stepped in to make that possible. They came to her home once a week to do chores and 'tend' to Emma Mae. They did this for two years until her father remarried.

"Things have changed a lot since 1946 when we had that first Bible School." emphasizes Mrs. New in slow measured words. The community had declined during the Great Depression because the cotton farms were no longer profitable. By 1946, many folks had sold-out to the timber companies and moved away. The school had consolidated with a town miles away and the post office was closed. Most of the country stores had gone out of business, but the Three Creeks Grocery, owned by Mrs. New and her husband Orland, was one of the few that held on.

Ouachita Baptist College student, Paul Shipman, became half time pastor of Three Creeks in the spring of '46. It was his idea to introduce Vacation Bible School. Ms. Peg says she had never heard of it before then.

The 15 miles of state highway between El Dorado, Ark. and Three Creeks was a dirt road that became a very long mud hole when it rained. The church was meeting in the abandoned schoolhouse and there was no plumbing or electricity. In those days, it wasn't called a 'mission trip', but Pastor Shipman organized four female students from Ouachita to bring Vacation Bible School to this remote area.

Twenty-six year old student, Annie Hoover (now a SBC Missionary Emeritus in Sapporo, Japan) led the mission team and was the principle of the VBS. They enrolled 42 and averaged 37. More significantly, they taught the local ladies how to do Bible School. Classes were organized for all the ages: beginner, primary, junior, and intermediate. That was one more class than there were rooms in the old school house, so Mrs. New's class of beginners met outside under a big oak tree.



“There was no money for anything” says Mrs. New. She doesn't remember any refreshments at this first VBS. When asked about crafts, she laughed and explained that one of the more 'prosperous' ladies of the church donated some old catalogs and magazines that contained colored pictures. She remembers the children cutting out pictures of food and pasting them on posters.

Emma Mae doesn't remember anyone being saved during the Bible School, but the week certainly had results for Christ. In those days, Three Creeks folks made their 'decisions' during the summer revival, which came a few weeks after VBS. That year, 12 children and adults were baptized in the Three Creeks swimmin' hole!

The four students that brought Vacation Bible School to Three Creeks must have laid a solid foundation, because this rural church still has a well staffed daytime school and last summer enrolled almost 250. That's quite a few more than their average Sunday School attendance. Thanks to workers like Emma Mae New, another generation is learning about the Savior.

How do you measure the life of a person like Mrs. New? As the world would see her, she is not well known or rich, but in her small corner of the world, she is both famous and wealthy. She is famous for her faithfulness, and wealthy in that most precious of commodities, Godly kindness. May we all pray that we become so wealthy and famous.