

THE CONSERVATIVE FRIENDS CHURCH

The various Meetings of the churches of the Religious Society of Friends in the Earlham area share common origins. The first settlers recorded by Darius Cook were Richard Mendenhall and his wife Elizabeth, members of Fairfield Meeting in Indiana. The Mendenhalls took up residence in Union Township, Dallas County, in May 1853. Others soon followed and by the summer of 1854 a Meeting for worship was held regularly in the home of William H. Cook. This group was accepted into Pleasant Plain Quarterly Meeting of the Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends on May 24, 1856.

The founders of this congregation were, for the most part, farmers from Ohio and Indiana who had moved west seeking a place where they could purchase land of their own. They had chosen the area

between the Raccoon River and Bear Creek because of the nearby timber for building and fuel. Many, coming as they did from timbered regions, found they had much to learn about farming the prairie soils.

The story of the Conservative Friends as a separate group began with a conference held at Bear Creek on May 29, 1877, under the leadership of Zimri Horner, David Mills, Benjamine Smith and Joel W. Bowles. This group drew up a rather lengthy statement of their dissatisfaction with changes in the conduct of Meetings for worship for which they asked approval by the Monthly Meetings. Failing to obtain this, the dissenting groups withdrew to form a new congregation at Bear Creek, North Branch, and Summit Grove near Stuart.

CONSERVATIVE FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE BEFORE IT WAS MOVED FROM EARLHAM IN 1917



CONSERVATIVE FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE AS IT APPEARS TODAY



The Conservative Friends called for a return to unprogrammed worship services with no especially appointed preacher. In their statement they bewailed “. . . the manner in which General Meetings are conducted . . . the introduction of the mourners bench and the . . . exciting scenes . . . wherein the young and inexperienced are urged to give expression to their overwrought feelings in a manner inconsistent with our principles.”

Protesting as they were against practices most of their neighbors considered progressive, the Conservative Friends felt called to be a group apart. To guard their children against the world, they sent them to their own schools. Bear Creek's school met first on the Abner Newlin farm in 1892 with Joanna Bowles Mott as teacher. This school continued until 1933. The building was moved to its present location on land donated by Henry Standing in 1914.

The North Branch Meeting moved to a new Meeting House in Earlham in 1890. They met there for eighteen years, until 1908. The Bear Creek group continued to gather at their Meeting House just east of the cemetery of the same name until 1917. By then most of the membership lived east of the building and it was decided to move the larger and newer North Branch Meeting House to their 'schoolhouse lot'. This was done by William Mott of Iowa City and, in the words of Henry Standing, "was done to perfection . . . not even cracking the plaster on the walls". The building somewhat altered since, is still in use at that

location.

A visitor to the Bear Creek Conservative Friends Meeting on a Sunday morning in 1970 is likely to find a group of twenty to twenty-five worshippers, including eight to twelve children. True to the principles of the leaders of 1877, the form of the service stresses in its lack of liturgy or formal leadership, the responsibility of each individual for his own communion with the Father. After the closing handshake, the visitor will probably find it easy to feel completely at home. The membership of today includes more of a cross section of the community than in earlier years and the children attend public schools at least through eighth grade. Belief in the "guarded education" continues to the extent that Bear Creek Meeting, with others of the Iowa Yearly Meeting of Friends (Conservative) supports Scattergood School, a four year boarding high school near West Branch, Iowa. Most member children attend there during their high school years.

Looking toward the future, the Conservative Friends are going forward with renovation of the Meeting House basement and the heating system. They hope and expect that their group will share in the growth and population of the area. They assuredly will tell you that it is more important that they be true to their witness, individually and as a Meeting to the extent that they uphold that responsibility will the Meeting prosper.

Allen Treadway

