

A return to religious roots

Paw Paw pastor and his congregation help with physical and spiritual restoration of church in town named after his ancestor.

BY CHRIS MEEHAN
KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

The Rev. Richard Fenner surveyed the rolling countryside, the revival tent flapping in the wind and the refurbished steeple atop the church bearing his family name.

It was Sunday morning in a tiny town in upstate New York as Fenner, a Baptist preacher from Kalamazoo, was checking out the scenery.

Only three days before, the bearded, rough-hewn minister had arrived here in a caravan of trucks and cars from the East.

Having promised by do his level best to help rebuild the exterior of Fenner Community Church, the 47-year-old contractor and man of God had just finished what he set out to do.

Soon, he would preach inside the wood-paneled sanctuary and then he planned to perform a half dozen or so baptisms in a horse trough that nearby farmers had brought in for the occasion.

It was all part of the 200th anniversary of the only church in Fenner, a community of farms named after a former governor of Rhode Island and an ancestor of Richard Fenner's.

"I felt a kindred spirit when I first visited Fenner Community Church," said Fenner, the pastor of Glendale Baptist Church in Paw Paw.

"I could feel a faith and message from the centuries echoing through the walls. It was a dying church that spoke to my spirit," he added in an interview after he returned from the restoration trip to the town 25 miles southwest of Syracuse.

Ups and downs

Organized by seven men and their families on Aug. 23, 1801, the Fenner church has gone through good and bad times over the last two centuries.

Site of countless chicken dinners, election-day gatherings, religious revivals, commemorations for wartime heroes and, of course, marriages, baptisms and funerals, the church has been used sparsely in recent years.

But then, as the 200th anniversary approached, this minister from Michigan seemed to appear out of

nowhere. With skill and know-how and backbreaking labor from nearly 30 of his church members from back home, Fenner rebuilt the bell tower and sided and painted the structure.

In the process, he has helped bring the building back to life.

"We will be eternally grateful to Reverend Fenner and his people who came out to do the work for us," said Gerald A. Davies, a retired postal worker and historian for the Township of Fenner.

"Everything that Richard Fenner said he was going to do, he did. He is truly an amazing person."

'That's exciting'

Only a handful of people currently meet in the church on Sunday evenings for a service.

"There has been a small community of people trying to keep the church going," said Davies. "Right now, new people are getting involved and that's exciting."

Two years ago, after preaching at a church in Boston, Fenner and his father, also named Richard, decided to track down and stop in the community named after their kin.

Fenner's son, Chris, had come across the town while searching the Internet. But the community was on no map.

"We stopped at several county seats and finally learned that Fenner was in Madison County," said Fenner, who has pastored the small rural church outside Paw Paw for more than a decade.

Once they arrived, other than a snowplow on whose shovel was lettered the name of the town, there was no sign that they had it right. But there they were, in Fenner, and they couldn't miss the dilapidated church.

Surrounded by sprawling farms, it and a pole barn were the only buildings in town.

"We drove around, talked to a couple people and got some phone numbers to track down more information," said Fenner. "Then we went home."

'Revival broke out'

A phone call or two put him in touch with Davies, the historian, and eventually Fenner accepted an invitation to preach at the community church last summer.

From there, he made plans to return this year, in connection with the 200th anniversary, to help celebrate the birthday and to work on the church.

"We didn't go there for a vacation," said Eric Gardner, music

ROOTS

From Page D1

minister at Glendale Baptist Church. "We knew we were going to do some work. We had no idea the depth of it."

Using many materials donated by businesses in Kalamazoo, Fenner and his crew worked nearly around the clock for two days to fix and spruce up the church.

"It was a wonderful experience," said Gardner. "The people out there flooded us with food, including fresh milk straight from the cow."

Assisted by a few residents from nearby farms and far-flung towns, church members from Glendale Baptist were able to finish on Saturday before the big Sunday doings.

"When the work was done, revival broke out big time," said Fenner, who runs his own construction business in Kalamazoo.

"There were testimonies and confessions and people getting saved. God's spirit was thick in the air."

Fenner preached Sunday morning and later baptized a few folks. By nightfall, he and his group had packed up their big revival tent, climbed in their vehicles



DEANNA POPE / SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

After working on the church in Fenner, the Rev. Richard Fenner and Eric Gardner baptized a few people, including David Bills of Kalamazoo.

and headed home.

Hopes are to return next summer to help rehabilitate the sanctuary.

For now, Fenner is pleased to have connected to a place that ties in to his heritage. He is also happy about something else.

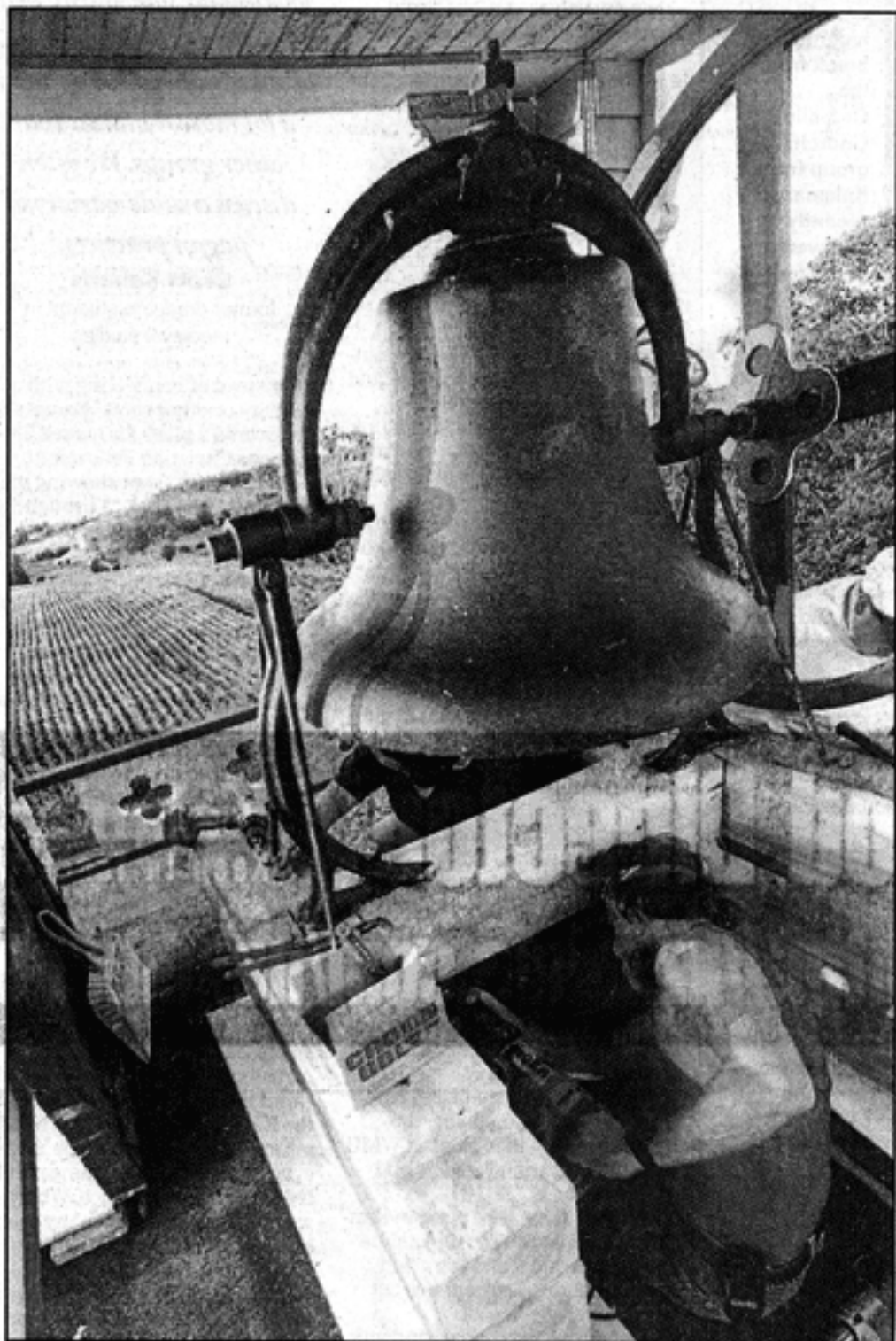
"The bell in the steeple was once the voice of the community. It had been silent for decades," he

said.

But now, because of sweat of people from the church in Paw Paw, that bell is ringing.

"When it rings, it is heard from everywhere," said Fenner. "I'm glad we got it working again."

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CHRIS FENNER / SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

The Rev. Richard Fenner works on the platform for the bell at the church that is named after one of his ancestors.