

(Drawing by J. Fife)

THE OLD THELEWARLE CHURCH

Erected about 1870

BAPTIST INDIAN CHURCH:
THLEWARLE MEKKO SAPKV COKO

*By Sharon A. Fife**

The large part of the Creek Indians came into Oklahoma from their former homelands about 1836. Shortly after their arrival they began establishing their churches. Thlewarle Indian Baptist Church was established approximately three miles north-east of present Dustin, Oklahoma—formerly Spokogee Township, Indian Territory.¹ It is in a rural, wooded area on church owned property. The first Thlewarle Mekko Sapkv Coko (House of Prayer) was built in 1870. However, the Indians of this community had been having church meetings since 1858. Before the original church house was built, services were held under a brush arbor. At times, an old white man in the community would invite the Creeks to hold services in his large living room, although he was not a Christian himself.²

Families began building camp houses around the church as soon as it was possible. All but three houses have since been rebuilt, yet these are in very good condition. Several camps have been added.

Before the camp houses were built, the people would come to church in wagons and bring tents, or walk and carry their necessities. Even during a blizzard most of the congregation would come. They would bring a bale of hay for the horses and another for beds. Feather beds were thrown over the hay, and blankets were used for warmth yet some say it was never very cold inside the tents.

At present there are eleven family camp houses that surround the church house. These camps are equipped with electricity, stoves, cabinets, dishes, cooking utensils, silverware, tables,

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¹ The Thlewarle Indian Baptist Church is on the south line in present Okfuskee County, in Sec. 35, T 10N, R 15 East. This was formerly in the Creek Nation, Indian Territory.

² Mr. James and Carmen (Griffin) Fife of Dustin (Sharon's parents) were informants on the history of the people and the relics in the Thlewarle Indian Church.

benches, chairs, ice boxes or refrigerators, sofas, beds, and other necessities. The camps resemble regular houses, and may be lived in at any time needed. Nearly all the houses have their own water well nearby. They were built for the convenience of the families who lived long distances away at a time when transportation was not too convenient. Their main purpose is for use when the church services lasted all weekend. During the Sunday meetings the owners of the camps serve dinner and supper to all the visitors. This food is brought and prepared by the women of the camps. They take care of all the expenses themselves. Some of the camps have several families within them so expenses are divided. Sometimes as many as 36 to 40 people are fed at one meal. Most camps serve over 50 people a day. Some of the visiting women wash a few dishes in return for the meal, but most of the work is done by the women and girls of the owners' families.

In 1914 Thlewarle was rebuilt. The old church was not torn down until 1959.³ It was built—as is traditional for all Creek churches—facing east. It is believed that when Hesaketumese (Christ) comes, he will come from the east with the sunrise. One very different thing about Thlewarle is that there is no sign of a cross on or inside the church house.

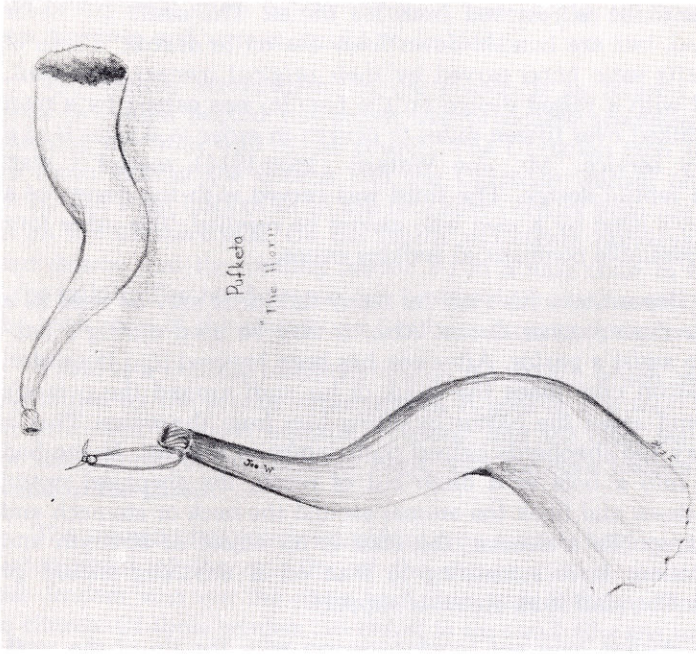
When Thlewarle was rebuilt, the old relics and procedures were carried over to be used in the new church.⁴ The relics—the deacons' staves and the horn are of great symbolic value to the church. Definite procedures are carried out during all ceremonies at the church, and they are maintained by the church leaders. The purpose of the relics and the duties of the church leaders must be presented before the ceremonies are introduced.

When a deacon is ordained, he is given a staff. He keeps his

³ All illustrations in this article are prints of the original drawings by Jimmie Carole Fife, a sister of Sharon, and daughter of Mr. James and Carmen (Griffin) Fife. This young artist has her B. A. degree in Fine Arts from Oklahoma State University (1963). She is now a teacher in the public schools at Dustin, Oklahoma. She has continued graduate work in art and her paintings have been shown in well-known Indian Art Exhibits in Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona.

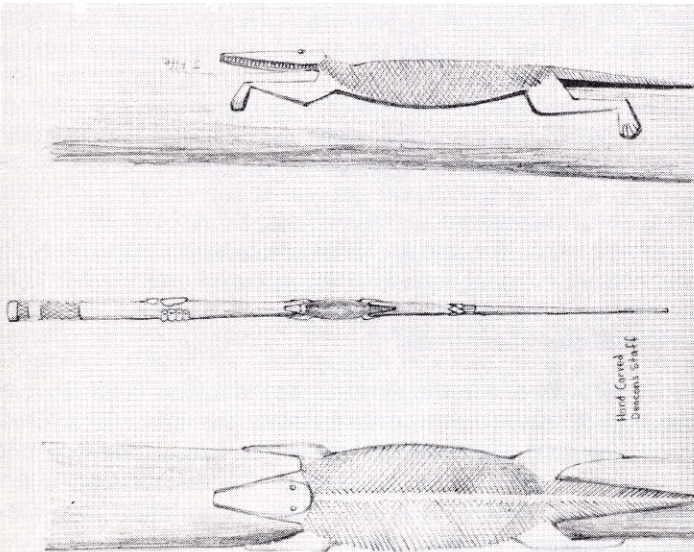
⁴ The principal informant on the procedures of Thlewarle Mekko Sapkv Coko and the symbolism of its relics was the late Josiah Barney Looney. He was born at Bryant, Okmulgee County, Oklahoma, May 20, 1920, the son of the late Reverend Barney and Winey (Riley) Looney. Josiah was a veteran of World War II. He was chosen at Arbeka Indian Church before he transferred his membership and became a deacon at Thlewarle Indian Church. He and his wife, Lela (daughter of the Reverend Edmund and Jeanetta (Lowe) Whitlow) had three children, Charles, Kathleen and Barton.

(Drawings by J. Fife)



PUFKETA—"THE HORN"

The Horn is blown by a deacon to call the congregation together.



DEACON'S STAFF

Hand carved reptile figure—alligator

staff until he is removed from his duties. The staffs are never replaced, but are handed down from deacon to deacon. Three of the staffs were hand carved by their original owners. One staff, carved with a raised design on the handle, was carved by a man who walked over fifteen miles to church in order to donate it at a Sunday service. Mr. Joe Watson (1850-1914) carved a staff with a reptile design. The third was carved with the design of a monkey's head by a man who cannot be recalled. The other four staffs resemble commercial walking canes.

A deacon uses his staff for many duties. It may be used as a pointer during usher duties. Also, it may be used during a baptism to assist a pastor. After one has been lowered into the water, the deacon may place the crook of his staff around the person's neck and assist the pastor in lifting him from the water. This is the way the shepherds helped their lambs in distress. If one had fallen into a hole or a ditch out of reach, the shepherd would reach down and hook the animal around the neck or stomach and pull it up. To a deacon, the staff is an object of strength and consolation. It is something to lean on if anything should go wrong. The staff is an object of support.

A deacon may not touch a person with the tip of the staff. This could bring bodily harm, embarrassment, or could knock the breath out of the person it touches. If he does touch a person with his staff, he must do so by laying the side of his staff against the arm of the person he is touching. Nor can a deacon lay his staff flat on the ground. It must always be tilted with one end off the ground. When not in use a staff must always lean against something, even if it must be against the deacon's foot.

When the congregation is called into church for services, a horn is always used. The one at Thlewarle is made from the horn of a long-horned steer. It was donated to the church by Mr. Joe Watson, carver of the reptile designed staff. It is not known exactly when he donated these items.

Before it is time for the services to start, the head deacon appoints one of the other deacons to blow the horn. It is used for two calls, and at each call it is blown four times. The first call is for everyone to prepare for the service. The second call is for the starting of the service. It is also blown at midnight each December 31 to welcome the New Year.

During the services, it is the custom for the men to sit on the

south side of the church and the women to sit on the north side. The explanation given by the members is from the Bible which says that men and women should be divided.

The seating arrangement in the church is as follows. The pastor is seated behind the pulpit. All preachers attending are seated at the front wall of the church. The Christian men sit on the south side of the church and the Christian women on the north. The class leaders sit in the first seven chairs from the pulpit on the women's side. On the fourth and eighth Sundays, the head deacon and the visiting deacon sit in a long chair in front of the pulpit. The head deacon sits in this chair at all meetings.⁵ The back rows of the church are for the visitors and members.

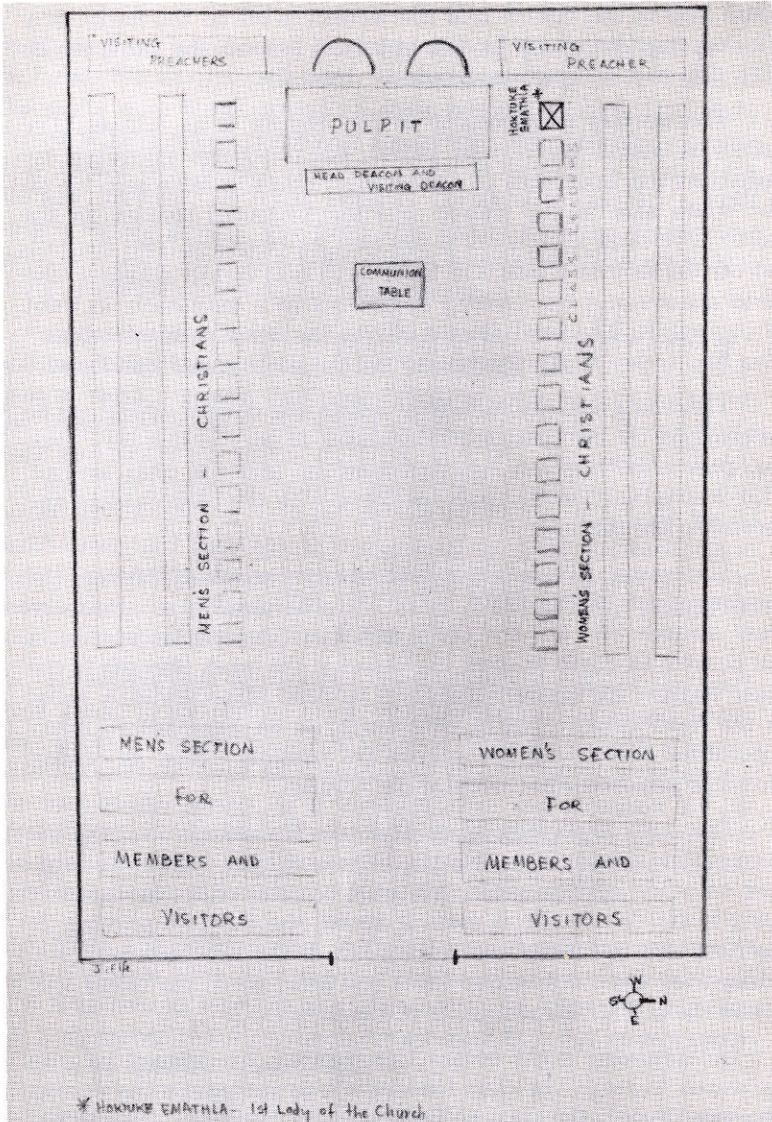
There is a definite hierarchy within the church which can be determined by the seating arrangement. It goes in this way: pastor, preachers, licensed minister, deacons, and the class leaders. The descriptions of the positions begin with the class leaders and ascend to the pastor.

The women play a very important part as class leaders in the reinforcement of the stability of the church. There are seven class leaders who are the older and more experienced women of the church. Of these women, the oldest is the head. She sits in the chair nearest the pastor's pulpit. The head class leader is equal to the head deacon. Her permission must be given before many procedures concerning the church are possible. She is called *Hoktuke Emathla*-First Lady of the Church.

The most important job of *Hoktuke Emathla* is to make the Communion bread. This is made before sunrise, before the birds sing or other creatures stir. All must be still while the bread is being made. While she is making bread, she must be praying. If she does not, the bread will tell on her. If the two preachers presiding over the Communion have not been good, the bread will tell on them. This is the miracle of Communion.

On Saturday night before Communion, the women go into the woods to pray. The class leaders talk to and advise the women who want to join the church. They pray for *Hoktuke Emathla* before she makes the Communion bread. Four times they sing and pray before they return from the woods. While they are there, no one but the class leaders may talk.

⁵ In 1919 this chair was donated to the church by the Reverend Sunday Fife.



(Drawing by J. Fife)

THE NEW THLEWARLE CHURCH SEATING ARRANGEMENT

The diagram shows position of the new church relating to the old church and of surrounding camp houses with the names of owner's—members of the congregation.

There are seven appointed deacons in the church. They help with the Communion service, take up collections and usher. They mainly keep order within the church. These men are not chosen according to age as the class leaders are. They must have a thorough knowledge of the church, and be responsible for a wide variety of duties. Most duties of the deacons are mentioned throughout this text and are not classified here.

The licensed minister is a novice chosen by the congregation. One day the pastor may tell the church body that a new preacher is needed. He asks the congregation to try to find a man suitable for this job. The people go out and fast and pray and look for a sign in a dream or some spiritual way. On the eighth Sunday, the pastor asks the congregation if they have found a preacher. If not, they must go out to search again. The following eighth Sunday, he will ask again. This is done until a preacher is found. The selection is usually made among the deacons. When a man is found who is thought to be suitable for the job, he is made a licensed minister.

A licensed minister is trained by the pastor. He may practice his sermons only in his home. The pastor listens, teaches, and encourages him. When he is proficient, he then goes to preach at his church. Other churches are notified, and he is invited elsewhere to preach. Meanwhile, the church members determine his worth. He must prove himself over a period of many months, and if all are satisfied, he becomes a preacher. Although a preacher or pastor may officiate over Communion, a licensed minister cannot. A licensed minister is the person who tells the congregation that a lost soul is wanting to join the church. He also acts as an advisor to the church members.

The work of the preacher is to preach for lost sinners. The church must have a preacher at all times. If a preacher is at fault, he will be dismissed from his duties, and a preacher from another church presides until this place can be filled. Sometimes a preacher's position cannot be filled for several months. The last preacher replaced at Thlewarle had shirked his church responsibilities and began attending stomp dances. Since stomp dances are a form of religion themselves, they do not cohere with Christianity.

The pastor of the church is the superintendent of the spirit. He is chosen in much the same way as a preacher. When he is chosen, he must go into the woods and fast many days in order to become close to the spirit. One pastor fasted for a week before

returning. It is he who holds the flock in church and controls the church. A pastor remains at this job until he dies, unless he has faults and is removed.

The pastor and preacher are not on a payroll, nor do they retire. They are concerned with the present, and must take care of their people. When collections are taken, they usually receive part of the money—if they are old, sick, or disabled. If they have jobs and are self-supporting, they get nothing. The collections are small. The average amount given to a pastor or preacher is about five dollars. These men will never ask for money from the congregation but will accept a gift given from them. Pastors feel that they do not have to be paid for something that will give them a greater reward in the end.

Church services at Thlewarle are held in the Creek language. Creek bibles and song books are used during the services. Usually the preacher's voice can be heard fairly well at a distance. When the congregation sings, they seem to reach an ecstatic state of being, and their beautiful songs can be heard within a radius of a mile or more. A musical instrument is not used.

When non-Creek speaking visitors are present, the sermon is sometimes given partly in English. This is usually difficult since many of the older preachers rarely speak English, if at all. And when a preacher is fervently speaking on a subject such as the destruction of Sodom, the least thing he is interested in is a well chosen word in English. Some people may think it odd to hear Lot's wife referred to as "Old Lady Lot."

Church services are not held every Sunday at Thlewarle, but in four-week cycles. This gives the congregation an opportunity to visit other churches in the area. The meetings are called the fourth Sunday and the eighth Sunday. The fourth Sunday is the regular church meeting. On the eighth Sunday the Wine Drinking service is held. During the interval between the fourth and eighth Sundays, small weekly meetings are held.

The fourth Sunday meeting is held the fourth weekend after Communion service. The meeting actually begins on Friday evening and continues through Saturday. The services last until about ten or twelve o'clock each night. As day breaks on Sunday morning, the services commence. Sunrise is an important time for the beginning of vital ceremonies. Deacon Josiah Looney gave the reason: "Christ said, 'Look for me early in the morning.' When

we begin our rites at sunrise, we feel much closer to Christ." All members of the church fast until noon during the meetings.

After the morning service and before dinner is served, a collection is taken for the three treasuries and for the sick. As many preachers as possible have been invited to Thlewarle, and after dinner each takes his turn at the pulpit. The afternoon session lasts until about five o'clock before the congregation breaks for supper. After the evening meal services are held until midnight. In the days of teams and wagons, the congregation stayed over and had services again on Monday.

On Wednesday night of the fifth week and Thursday night of the sixth week Prayer Meetings are held. During this time a small business meeting is held whenever necessary. The treasury reports are given at the meetings. The Sister Treasury is used for the needs of the women or camps. If a camp is in need of new dishes or other items, this fund may be used in case of financial need. The Donation Treasury is used for paying utility bills and the upkeep of the church. The Church Treasury buys the Communion wine and other things the church needs.

The Friday night of the sixth week is Ladies Meeting. This is a day of fasting for the women. They begin from the time they arise until after the evening service. They fast for something that is spiritually desired, and are allowed to appoint the preacher for the day. Since it is their day, they are able to tell the men what to do—and they must do it. During the services the women are called upon to lead songs and pray. Sometimes the women lead songs in couples. This is done until all have participated, and then the men proceed to do the same. Usually, not many men attend.

After the prayers and songs are over, the pastor reads from the scriptures and gives the women words of encouragement and well wishing. The congregation lines up and shakes hands in fellowship, and services are dismissed for supper. The women prepare the food, then the preacher they have appointed for the day asks the blessing. There are no services after supper.

On Friday of the seventh week preparations begin for the Wine Drinking ceremony. The services last until midnight and then recess. Usually the church members go to one of the camp house kitchens for coffee and to visit.

Services are held all day Saturday. After the preacher de-

livers the evening service, he invites the backsliders and sinners to repent. This is Testimonial Night. If a Christian who has not been faithful to his religious activities and vows approaches to repent his sins, he must voice his wrong doings before the whole congregation. The church leaders deliberate over his case and pray for him. Later they have a general meeting at a designated time, and discuss whether he should yet be admitted back into the group of Christians. Some cases take long periods of time before there is unanimous approval from the leaders. If a person is unable to attend Testimonial Night, he may give his testimony at the eighth Sunday meeting. The Christians are not particularly interested in what a person has done, but *why* he has done it. If a person does not give his explanations, he does not take the wine. It will do him no good if he is unworthy.

At sunrise on the eighth Sunday, Hoktuke Emathla makes the Communion bread in her camp house. Church services start at dawn, and the church members fast until the noon meal. The afternoon service starts about two o'clock and lasts a couple of hours before a recess. After the short break the deacon blows the horn, and the congregation gathers for Wine Drinking.⁶

During the Last Supper, the Communion table is placed in the center of the church floor. Two preachers sit on the west side of the table and two deacons sit opposite on the east side. The pastor begins the service with a prayer and a song, then he reads from the Bible. While he takes the bread, all the Christians kneel in prayer and the other members bow their heads. When the pastor rises, the preacher on the left stands, breaks the bread, and hands a plate of it to each deacon. One deacon serves the Christian men and the other serves the Christian women. When this is finished, the preacher on the left hands the wine to the two deacons, and they follow the same procedure.

After the wine has been served, the preacher on the left gives the people encouragement for the religious life, and gives the pastor permission to make any announcements. Just before dismissal, the people make a circle and begin shaking hands in fellowship. The women shake hands first, and the men follow—all the while, they are singing. The preacher who officiated over the wine dismisses the service with a prayer.

After dismissal and before supper the two deacons officiating

⁶The ceremony is generally referred to as Wine Drinking or Last Supper instead of Communion.

gather all the children together and let them take whatever bread and wine is left.

Thlewarle accepts any person desiring to be baptized. For a description of a Creek baptism, a young girl is used here as an example: When a girl expresses her desire to be baptized, the head class leader takes her outside and prays for her. She asks the girl whom she wishes to baptize her, and when she wishes it to be done. The girl is taken back into the church, and the class leader tells the pastor what she has decided. The announcement is made to the congregation.

The two main deacons are designated to look for the water. If the person desires to be baptized that day, the deacons begin looking for the water immediately. If the ceremony is to be the next morning, they will wait until sunrise. The water must be navel deep to the person being baptized. A stick is used to measure the depth, and when water is found of the prescribed depth, the stick is stuck into the creek bed as a marker. A piece of white linen is tied to the top of the stick. At Thlewarle, the people are always baptized in creeks or rivers because still or enclosed water will not cleanse a person's sins. It does not make much difference what season a person may want to be baptized. In 1965 the deacons had to chop through two inches of ice to clear a place to baptize a fifteen year old girl.

The whole congregation goes to the baptism. The creek that is generally used is about one-fourth mile into the woods down a hilly, rocky path. The church members walk four abreast into the woods to the water—two lines of men and two lines of women. The congregation stands on a high bank overlooking the water. The pastor, preachers, deacons, class leaders, and the young girl go to the lower bank.

A short service is held before the baptism. The class leaders then dress the girl. Four of the ladies hold up blankets to improvise a room for her. Three of the ladies help her change her clothes. A piece of white linen is tied around her head and waist as a symbol of purity. The class leaders then pray for the girl and advise her before she is taken to the water.

During the baptism, one of the deacons may assist the pastor. The remaining deacons usually are kneeling in prayer a few feet from the bank in the shallow water. After the baptism the deacons and class leaders usually walk into the water and shake hands with the new Christian. The girl is then brought out of the

water, and the class leaders change her clothes. A prayer and a song is again given for her, and the meeting at the water is dismissed.

Upon arrival at the church the girl is seated in the center of the church (in the location of the Communion table). She leads a song and a prayer. The pastor encourages her, and tells her what she can do or cannot do. The class leaders advise her. She is talked to as if she were a new-born baby starting a new life. From this time on she will take her place with the Christian women on their side of the church.

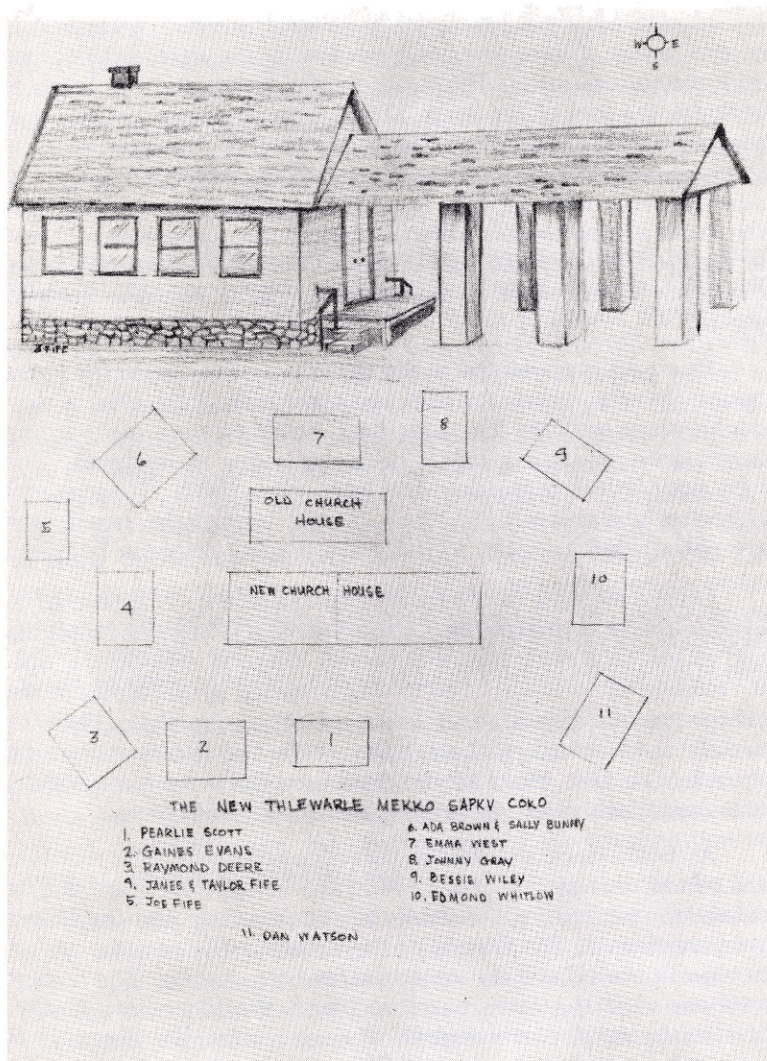
When a person has been baptized, the pastor will ask him in which church he desires membership. He may take his papers to any established church but not to a mission church. If a person wishes to have his name removed from the roll, he must come back to the church in person, distance disregarded, and give his reasons. A letter is never sent from Thlewarle with membership papers in it.

Services for the sick are an integral part of Thlewarle. If a person of the church is ill, the church members designate a date to go to that person's house. The meeting is held no longer than necessary in consideration for the sick. It is said that in the days when communication was not easy, people would still gather at a sick bed. If a person knew he was on his death bed, he usually desired to have the church members come and sing to him and pray for him. Although no one was told of his coming death, they seemed to sense it. One by one the church members would show up at the house of the sick person as if they knew that his death was near. They would usually hold services all night for that person before he died.

When a person dies, total respect is shown the dead person's body from the time he dies until he is in his grave house. The funeral is held the fourth day after death. On the third day the body is brought from the funeral home to the church. The congregation prays for the body. If the family of the deceased want to have all night services, they do. If not, family and friends stay up with the body all night.

During the four-day period, the family of the deceased rules the church. They may ask for any kind of service, and the church members will never refuse them.

On the fourth day the family places small containers of the



(Drawing by J. Fife)

THE NEW THLEWARLE CHURCH

Erected in 1914

deceased's favorite food in the coffin. This is so that the spirit will come back, but will not bother anyone. The deceased is not buried with his shoes on, nor is he dressed in wool (because it is of the lamb). Bibles are not buried with the deceased because they cannot use them—Bibles are for the living. A grave house is built for the soul of the dead. This is a small house that fits over the grave. It has a small window at the head of the grave which is the west end. The grave house is considered to be the home of the dead, because without it he would have a home no more. When the grave houses become rotten or broken they cannot be replaced or repaired. The Creeks believe that the older the house becomes, the newer it will seem to the spirit. Age is an opposite thing in death.

One man is appointed to dig the grave and to build the grave house. He asks no one for help, but other men of the church may donate their services. The men have breakfast very early in the morning on the fourth day. The grave is dug at daybreak. The men pray before they labor and when they finish. Tobacco and cigarettes are presented to them. Young boys under twenty-one are not allowed to assist in the grave digging or house building.

On the morning of the fourth day one woman is appointed to oversee the food preparation. A short service is held that morning and at eleven o'clock dinner is served cafeteria style in the utility room or out-of-doors. The food is prepared by the ladies of the church camps, friends, and ladies of other churches. There is usually food enough to completely cover five tables measuring three by ten feet. Many of the dishes are Creek recipes: Sofkee, blue dumplings, grape dumplings, sour bread, and others.

At two o'clock the funeral service commences. The relatives are seated nearest the casket. After the eulogy has been read, a collection is taken for the family of the deceased, and the flower girls are named. The friends of the deceased file past the casket to view the body, and the congregation rises, singing. The distant relatives view the body next, and then the immediate family. It is understood that everyone who ever knew the deceased is expected to attend the funeral. The number in attendance depends on how well known the deceased was. Sometimes the line of viewers lasts over two hours before the family of the deceased is able to view.

When the body is taken to the family cemetery, the congregation follows for graveside rites. The pallbearers carrying the

body from the hearse to the grave change about every twenty feet. They must be careful not to tire while carrying a dead weight or it will make them sick. Before the casket is lowered into the grave, it is opened again for those who were not at the church funeral. The preacher reads a scripture, and a prayer is said for the body before the casket is closed. A blanket is put over the casket. It is lowered into the vault box, and the top is fastened to the box. While the casket is being lowered, the people sing "Illka Este," (Where Shall the Body Rest).

The grave diggers begin covering the grave after the song. They fill the grave until it reaches the top of the box. Two men (sometimes four, according to the number of people present) on each end of the grave then take their shovels and fill them with fresh dirt from the grave. The people file by and take a clod of dirt from the shovel and drop it into the grave for the "last handshake." Sometimes a clod lands where the dirt is spread thin and hits the vault box, and a lonely thud breaks the silence. The grave is filled by all men and friends of the family. The flowers are taken from the flower girls and placed on the grave. If a child is being buried, his favorite toys are placed on the grave. The grave house is placed over the grave, and the ceremony is ended with a song and a prayer. Everyone stays until the grave is completely covered and the house is put onto the grave. The body of the deceased is highly regarded until the last minute of its care.

When the graveside rites are over the pastor announces when the family "washing" will be. The rule is that if a person has been sick for a long while, the women will clean the house for the family and wash all the bedding, clothing, and other things used by the deceased. After this announcement the congregation returns to the church for a light supper.

After the grave has been covered and the grave house secured over the grave, the men in charge of the grave digging and house building take their tools to the creek. They say a prayer then lay the tools in the creek so that the water will run over them and cleanse death from them. Sometimes the tools are treated with Indian medicine.

If desired, the family of the deceased may take the same medicine before the funeral. It is sometimes given to nervous or fretful children. This is not a regular custom now.

Although the church seems closely knit, it has had its difficulties. At one time, many years ago, there was a falling out among

the church members, and all but three people quit coming to church. These were the Reverend and Mrs. Sunday Fife and a very, very, old woman, the Hoktuke Emathla. The three continued to come at the designated meetings times. Reverend Fife would preach to the two women as if the house were full. They would sing and pray together all weekend or whenever the meeting time was. They continued to come to church and have services for quite a while, and finally the church members began coming back to Thlewarle, one by one, until it was again filled.

Through all the years, the church has not changed much. The people come in cars now. One man still walks. They all assist each other wholeheartedly when they are in need of anything—whether it is woodchopping, collections or quilting. Prayer is still important before and after every ceremony from a quilting bee to a baptism or to building a grave house. Some of the women still wear long dresses, long aprons, and scarves around their heads. Some carry money tied in the corner of their handkerchief, and absolutely refuse to speak English in the presence of so many people that most of their acquaintances would swear they could not. Some of the men still wear blue overalls, workshirts, brogans, cowboy boots, or they may wear their best suits, invariably with the vest buttoned wrong. But these are the old people, and they will stay. And the next generation and the next generation will stay. But the younger people are moving away, and many cannot speak Creek. Someday, too soon, the church may have only three people in it again—or none.

Or, hopefully, it may not change much at all.