

# A sanctuary for a bygone boomtown

This is part of a weekly series featuring members of the area's faith communities. To suggest a story idea, e-mail editor@wilcosun.com.

By AMIRA JENSEN

**T**hrall was a boomtown in the 1930s, with the land's oil drawing in people and prosperity to its prairie lands. Today, the area has mostly been reclaimed by vegetation, dotted with a few remaining houses and working

## Articles of Faith

oil wells. In the middle of the sleepy town on County Road 473, the Lawrence

Chapel Cemetery tells the history of the community. In front of it, a small structure with fresh white paint proves that not everybody has forgotten the town's significance.

"This is very likely the first Methodist church built in Texas," said Walter Thoms.

Mr. Thoms moved to Thrall with his wife 22 years ago and built a house just a stone's throw away from the historic structure. When his wife decided that the solitude of the town

was not fitting for her, the couple kept their land in Thrall but moved into Taylor. Mr. Thoms' wife has since passed away, but he still comes out to the country every day to feed his livestock out there and sometimes go hunting.

"This is one of those places where I'm the only one here," Mr. Thoms said.



Lawrence Chapel, located on County Road 473 in the countryside outside Thrall, stands in front of the Lawrence Chapel Cemetery. The original church and cemetery were founded in 1838 by Adam Lawrence, who is now buried there.

Andy Sharp

When Mr. Thoms was first looking in the area to buy land, he spent a lot of time researching the area and looking at land deeds in the courthouse, he said. What he found out was that Thrall was not only a land rich in oil, but also of history.

The church land had originally been donated to the community by Texas Revolutionary soldier Adam

'Ad' Lawrence and his wife, Sarah, in the mid-1800s. Mr. Lawrence, who founded the community in 1838, is considered to be one of the first settlers of Williamson County.

In its beginnings, the church's congregation was roughly half-Methodist and half-Baptist. According to *The*

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Photos by Andy Sharp

Above, Walter Thoms prepares to enter the Lawrence Chapel cemetery on Friday, accompanied by one of his hound dogs. Below, the gravesite of Adam Lawrence, founder of Lawrence Chapel and Cemetery, is seen in the cemetery.

## FAITH

### *Lawrence Chapel keeps history of Thrall's first settler*

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*Ladder of Rivers* by Harry Chrisman, the main dispute between the two sects was over the definition of "locusts" in John the Baptist's diet, "a diet reported to have been locusts and wild honey," the book says.

"The split came over the definition of 'locusts,' with some, the Baptists, affirming it was grasshoppers, meant by the Good Book. The Methodists thought as surely it meant locust beans, the *boecksur* of the Hebrews."

The church served the community, which was first called Cross Roads and later known as Lawrence Chapel. The log house also served as a school, with 38 pupils on its roster in 1903.

Mr. Lawrence was wealthy in land, with 4,000 acres at his disposal. But as the community grew, the pioneer uprooted his wife and took her to California, where he established a ranch in present-day Los Angeles.

"He'd seen too many smoke stacks in the morning and too many neighbors moving in," Mr. Thoms said.

But the settler got down on his luck and returned to the area after losing his wealth as well as his wife. He moved

in with his daughter and son-in-law in what is known as the Washington Bower house, where he died on October 2, 1878.

Mr. Lawrence's body was laid to rest behind the church in the Lawrence Chapel Cemetery. The cemetery's headstones are filled with the names of its early settlers, such as the Olive family whose ranch house was originally down the lane from the log church. There are also many headstones with the last name "Laurence," which some speculate are kin to Mr. Lawrence. Mr. Thoms heard that the mailman used to put mail for the Laurences in a tree knot, and that so many of them grew tired of having their mail read by others that they changed the spelling of their last name.

"That may be a fact, or it may be a story," Mr. Thoms said.

The original church that was built in 1838 burnt down at some point, and the structure that stands today is about 100 years old. The church's façade juts out in a half circle at the center, with screened doors on either side of the protruding dome. Inside, an altar stands at the front of the sanctuary, where weddings and funerals still proceed. In the back are two small Sunday school rooms, dusty with the remains of Bible lessons from yesteryear. In one room, a church pew rests alongside the wall.

Although the church is locked up and the screen doors stick, a Lawrence Chapel Board does what it can to keep up the church and its neighboring cemetery. There is talk of extending the cemetery's



chain link fence outward, to include the innumerable burials of minority members that were originally buried outside the cemetery's borders. The board keeps the church freshly painted, and has moved Mr. Lawrence's original log cabin next the church, where they hope to restore it into its original condition. The board hosts annual chili suppers for their historic preservation efforts.

"I admire them for the effort," Mr. Thoms said. "This is Texas history."

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