

# Message in a Bottle

## A Biographical Series on Tyler County Folks

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### The Rev. James Mitchell, Logger and Pastor

Few pastors stay in a church longer than four or five years, a few will stay ten or more, but God truly blesses the church whose pastor stays for an entire generation. The Rev. James Mitchell has been the pastor of New Pilgrim Baptist Church for 27 years now, and he is still going strong at 78 years of age.

In a handshake, one can feel the grip of his big hand, latent with strength and a part of his story – he has always been a hard worker.

He has lived in Tyler County all of his life. At the end of the Great Depression, he grew up on a farm. The only school house available at the time was also a church, on some company land east of town. That was so long ago.

His father brought him and his brothers into the livestock auction business.

At the Gilchrist Grain Company, when the railroad came through Woodville, he helped unload box cars of grain and feed, 100 lb. and 50 lb. sacks, “but mostly 100 lb. sacks,” he said. One had to be strong to do that all day, but he did not think about it much at the time. “It was just something that one did,” he said. Yet, that kind of hard work is not seen today, when some youngsters complain over the simplest inconvenience.

“I had to learn how to work at 12,” he said, for that was when his father promoted him from plowing with one mule to two mules. Think about negotiating *two* mules

pulling a plow that a man guided *into* the dirt yard after yard, hundreds of yards upon hundreds of yards *all day* long – grappling with the reins and gripping the plow handles to keep the plow wrestled into the ground. One had to plow the field with a “turn plow,” then with a “mill buster” – that’s plowing the field twice. “Then we would take a piece railroad iron and tie one end to one mule and



another end to another mule, in order to flatten the furrows a bit, and then plant our seed.”

“It was an everyday thing,” he said, and chuckled. A couple of times, upon reflecting, he would give a hearty belly laugh and rub his thighs. He looks at one in the eyes and speaks directly. “We had chores to do in the morning, milk the cows, feed the horses, then work all day in the field, and then milk the cows at night, and put the horses and mules up.... It was especially nice to get a day off.”

He worked five or six years in the late 1940s at the Woodville Lumber Company.

They pulled the logs to the trucks with mules. His first job was “hooking tongs,” which was attaching the hooks on the ends of twelve or twenty-four foot logs, in order to pull the logs up onto the truck. It took three people to load a truck.

Those were the days long before the chain saw. Eventually he worked at “cross cutting,” which was when two men pulled a long saw back and forth, skillfully cutting in chunks so that the tree fell according to plan. This took a lot of strength to do all day long, cutting, hauling, loading timber.

As he reflected, James said he left home and left the church, and “stayed away from the church for a long time.”

He did logging contract work for a long time and worked for Harold Allison at the pole mill, too. He has been a logger most of his life.

One time a friend of his came to work after a particularly rough weekend. “He was not really sober,” James said, “So I thought to myself, ‘I am going to take care of him.’” James took his friend’s truck and headed down Hwy. 1746 toward Woodville, near the railroad tracks.

Only, the breaks were out in the truck!

“I did all I could do ... but as I was heading toward the railroad tracks an engineer was in the process of switching cars and the locomotive engine was in the track *in the road*,” he said, laughing and shaking his head, the drama still fresh in his mind. On each side of the road, as they did back then, were huge gasoline storage tanks, and hitting any one of those would have meant certain death.

“I had no choice,” James said. “So I eased out of the cab onto the running board of the truck and jumped off. The truck slammed into the locomotive engine and the engine did not move,” James said, slapping his hands. “It flattened the cab of the truck like a pancake; it was flat as a pancake.” The logs in the back of the truck just

flattened the cab against the immovable locomotive engine.

James quickly recovered from his fall and looked at the engine. People were coming to help. The locomotive engineer had fainted, and they had to wake him. Can you imagine the engineer’s sight? Seeing a fully loaded log truck heading right for you, then the driver easing out onto the running board, and jumping off, leaving the truck heading right at you – yeah, that would frighten most. The engineer would be okay.

“God had a plan for me,” said James, and “was watching out for me.”

Sometime later, James broke his leg and found himself in the Lufkin Memorial Hospital. A preacher was coming in, and “I wanted to run,” he said, “But my leg was in cement.... Those were some of the most spiritual services of my life.” His life changed, and he started going back to church.

As the years went by, James started his own logging company. When Hurricane Rita hit, so many people were affected and it changed the logging industry too. Not long after Rita, he sold all of equipment in order to retire and devote all of his time to his church and family.

During the last several decades, he has been the pastor of the New Pilgrim Baptist Church, 27 years now, and he enjoys it thoroughly. When asked about advice for young men and women, he said, “If you are not saved, seek salvation. Live according to His word.” On being a pastor, looking eye-to-eye and speaking directly, he said, “You have got to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Be sure God has called and placed you in the pulpit.”

He has been president of the Tyler County Ministerial Union for many years, participated with the other religious association in town, the Tyler County Ministerial Alliance, in joint county-wide revivals, and participated in the National Day of Prayer. Just a couple of Sundays ago, he

helped St. Luke's Methodist Church honor their pastor, the Rev. Dr. Sandra Wright, the administrator of the Tyler County Hospital.

Yes, Pastor James Mitchell is *still* logging, spiritually, and cutting and transporting timber for the kingdom of God. As one gospel song goes, he is "Sending Up His Timber" – praying and helping people and loving his family with all of his heart.

He married Gladys, his one and only wife, who went home to heaven in 2005. When asked how long he had been married, he did not hesitate (surprisingly) ... he did not flinch or glance away ... he continued eyes locked and said in a clear and direct fashion, "Fifty years, three months, and thirteen days."

He could not remember his wedding day. "We never had a wedding anniversary," he said, which seemed, at first, something hard to hear, even unusual. He sensed the consternation, was unashamed, and in his typically direct manner said, "We were just more concerned about family."

They had nine children, six girls and three boys. One joined the U.S. Marine Corp and lives in another part of the state. All of the rest of their kids live close by, most in Woodville. How many grandchildren? "Oh man," he laughed, "about twenty-five." Great-grandchildren? He laughed harder, rubbed his thighs, and smiled, "About ten or twelve ... they're coming pretty fast."

A *family* man ... with a kindly grip from a big hand that could ... one thinks ... *still* grab a 100 lb. sack and toss it on the porch even at 78. His strong spirit and his splendid family reflect so much more. With a big smile, he proudly says, "They watch out for me," as though they really did not *need* to "look out for him." He joked about "they're watching." He is watching them too, and loves them so much. Yet, if he needs them, anyone of them, "All I have to do is call, and they'll be here."

He has an army ready to help him.

One can hardly think of a greater blessing than nine children *looking* after their father, and twenty-five grandchildren, all living close by. It is every parent's dream. Reflecting on his comment, "they're coming pretty fast," a sense of humble pride resonated with a lot of memories, too many memories to count, and a healthy portion of satisfaction as the head of one of the largest families still living together in the county.

Carry on, Rev. Mitchell, and keep *Sending Up the Timber*.