“A. J. HOLT:
PIONEER PREACHER,
MISSIONARY TO WESTERN INDIANS,
AND FLORIDA BAPTIST PASTOR”

AN ADDRESS PRESENTED TO
THE FLORIDA BAPTIST
HISTORICAL SOCIETY

BY

Dr. E. Earl Joiner
Curator and Secretary-Treasurer
May 8, 1993

**"A. J. HOLT: PIONEER PREACHER,
MISSIONARY TO WESTERN INDIANS,
AND FLORIDA BAPTIST PASTOR"**

AN ADDRESS GIVEN TO
THE FLORIDA BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY
By Dr. E. Earl Joiner
Curator and Secretary-Treasurer
May 8, 1993

This paper will describe the life and ministry of one of the most remarkable ministers ever to emerge among the Southern Baptists. In his day he was widely known among Southern Baptists. Had he chosen a different route in his spiritual, intellectual and professional pilgrimage, he would be better known among Southern Baptists than he is. He deserves to be better known, and part of the purpose of this paper is to describe some of the qualities of his life that earn him a place among the great heroes of Southern Baptist history.

Family Background and Childhood (to Age 13)

He was born on December 1, 1847, named after the famed missionary to Burma, Adoniram Judson. Little is known of his father, Aaron Holt. In his autobiographical work, *Pioneering in the South-west*, Holt tells little about him. He does tell that his mother and father separated when he was a very small boy, and he visited him only a few times in Covington, Kentucky near Cincinnati. Some of these visits were planned with the approval of his mother. On other occasions, he ran away from his mother to visit his father, which suggests that he had good relations with both of them. The cause of their separation appears to have been disagreement over slavery. His father opposed it and, being from a Southern family, his mother and her family accepted slavery. Family splits over slavery were common in Kentucky.

His mother, Miriam Buckner, was the daughter of the pastor at Somerset, and one of his uncles, Robert Cook Buckner, founded the Buckner Orphan's Home in Texas. It still bears his name. His grandfather and two uncles were Baptist ministers and it was assumed by A.J. and the family that he would be a preacher also. When his father left and moved to the Cincinnati area, his mother left A.J. in the charge of his Buckner grandparents who lived at Perryville, Kentucky, and went off to school to become a teacher. Apparently, because of ill health, she was never able to fulfill her plans for very long, and often had to live with one of her brothers.

As a child A.J. Holt was full of energy and it appears that his grandparents spoiled him. He was so often in mischief and fights that one of his Sunday School teachers predicted that "that boy will be hung before he is 21 years old." Though he was very young at the time, he remembered the coming of Alexander Campbell, and the early frontier revivals begun by the Methodists. Some of them got the "jerks" in the meetings, so Holt decided that since he never got the jerks, he did not yet have religion.

Holt had an amazing memory and, probably because he was brighter than most of the other children, his early school experiences were frustrating and he was often in trouble, and was often told that he was a bad boy. Unfortunately, because of this, he began to think of himself as a bad boy. Thus, it was a great surprise to him when Dr. George Lorimer, a famous minister of Tremont Temple Baptist Church in Boston, came to town and visited his grandparents, took him on his lap, and told him he was a fine boy. Holt was moved to tears. No one had ever told him he was a fine boy. He decided then and there that he would be like that man, and he listened to him so carefully that he never forgot what he said. Later he told his grandmother he wanted to hear Dr. Lorimer preach. "But," she replied, "you have no hat, coat or shoes." "No matter," he said, "I will go bare-footed." He washed his face and rounded up his friends to go and hear the great man preach.

His remarkable character showed very early when, at age six, he went to visit his father and was taken to a July Fourth celebration. While waiting for the main show to begin, his father had him recite a

poem for the waiting crowd. The crowd went wild. Later he got lost from his father in the crowd and, despite his remarkable memory; he could not find his way home. He had only five cents. He used it to buy pencils which he then sold for enough to buy dinner, then slept on the steps of a store. The next morning he was still selling pencils when he was found and returned to his house in Perryville. Shortly after his return to Perryville, his mother put him to memorizing a sketch of Napoleon Bonaparte, planning to enter him in a school contest. When he told his teacher the next day that he was ready, the teacher was skeptical until he gave her a demonstration. When he delivered his speech, his reputation as a speaker was made.

In 1852, he bade farewell to his grandparents and went to live with his mother at Salvisa, Kentucky, where his uncle R.C. Buckner was pastor. Not long after that, it appears that his uncle R.C. moved to Texas, and his mother decided also to move to Texas. Apparently she was in no great hurry, and travel was slow, for it took them well over a year to get there. They caught the stage to the nearest railroad and the railroad to Louisville. There they took a steamboat down the Ohio and up the Mississippi to St. Louis, Missouri. In the Spring of 1858, they started out again for Texas, this time on the overland stage which was in a race with a sailing ship to see which could get to California first. It was a very rough trip. En route they ran out of money, wired his uncle and begged loans from Masons along the way, and he worked at odd jobs to keep them going. Finally arriving at Paris, Texas, where his uncle R.C. Buckner was pastor, they discovered that his mother's trunk had been lost on the stage, and he walked 200 miles looking for it in vain.

In Texas Holt was hired out to a local farmer while his mother sought work as a teacher. He then joined his mother for a short time before going to school; then boarded out with a minister named R.O. Potts. When the Civil War began, the Buckner grandparents came to Texas. Shortly after they arrived, his beloved grandmother died. His grief was beyond description, for no one had explained death to him or the prospects of life after death. He never got over her death, but it made him more sympathetic with others more than anything else he had learned.

Not long after his grandmother's death his mother experienced ill health again and she came to live with R.C. Buckner. While working for a farmer who was a relative, A.J. got into a fight with a Negro boy and won, but Sam Long, his relative, told him, "The boy that fights with a negro is no better than a negro." He was so insulted that he resolved never to eat his bread or sleep under his roof again. He went by his uncle's house, left a note to his mother, took his dog Lupus and struck out on his own at age 13. Even so, he cried himself to sleep that night, sleeping on leaves by the road.

Begging for food and catching rides and without much conviction about the cause, he joined the Confederacy in the Fall of 1862. His dog went home to A.J.'s mother who never found his note. He was given a job driving a wagon and later other jobs not requiring combat at first. Later, he was paid to substitute for a man who went home to visit his sick wife and then died himself. Holt then came close to being shot, became ill with typhoid, and was given a medical discharge.

He headed for Texas, catching rides to Paris, found his mother and gave her all the money he had, $350. However, he did not even stay for supper, and in 1863 he started to Bonham to got to school, but as the war dragged on he reenlisted. By now the war's end was near and he was soon discharged again, at age 17.

Education, Marriage, and Ministry

On being discharged he attended several schools for short periods, earning board by doing chores. He learned fast, and in a short time decided to go to college. He went to McKenzie College (later merged with Baylor) and after being examined there, was placed in the senior class. The next year he secured a teaching position in Paris, Texas and worked in his uncle's store.

Then in the Spring of 1867 he received an offer to come to Shreveport, Louisiana, to work in a bookstore at better pay and wound up marrying Alice Markham, the daughter of the bookstore's owner. His bride was given 300 acres of fine land. It was while he was in Shreveport that, at 20 years of age, he made his first public profession of faith and was told that God was calling him to preach. Although he had long assumed that someday he would be a preacher, now the prospect scared him half to death. Moreover,

he was to preach the very next day. Looking back, he wrote that his first efforts were terrible; that he had such an exalted idea of what a preacher should be that he feared he could never make it. However, opportunities to preach came and gradually he improved, having never heard of a seminary. His first knowledge of a seminary came from J.R. Graves, who spoke for three hours at the Louisiana Baptist Convention in 1869. Holt was enthralled and loved Graves. When he met him, Graves told him to go to school.

He did not act on that suggestion immediately, however. Rather, he decided to go to Texas, traveling with an ox wagon on two yoke of oxen. It took him two months. There he taught school (for pay), and preached at small churches (without pay – it was not the custom).

His description of the small churches is simple: no instruments, one hymnal, no choir, sermons one or two hours on Saturday, then business meeting and church discipline. While there, he became successful as a preacher, holding revivals and baptizing more than all the other preachers in the association combined. At one meeting in Perryville, two men shot each other to death outside the church after an argument over a two-dollar bet on a horse race.

In 1874, when the SBC met at Jefferson, Texas, Holt went and, on hearing Dr. Broadus, he decided to go to the Seminary which was still at Greenville, S.C. Going there was a revealing and shocking experience for him. For one thing, he had been preaching for several years by then and was considered the best preacher in his area of Texas. At the Seminary, though, he learned that he knew nothing about preaching. Here he had to learn to think. Memorizing was easy for him, thinking was hard, Also, he was the only student there from Texas and his Texas twang made him the object of much humor. Broadus was rough on him, too, and he considered leaving, but he decided to stay, keep his mouth shut, and learn.

While there he studied under Crawford Toy, who was later forced to resign because of his scholarly approach to the Scriptures. He was ahead of his time. Still, Holt considered him a Christian gentleman. While there for only a year (1874-75) he grew tired of not preaching, and one Sunday he went down to Reedy River and found some row houses where factory workers lived and started holding services. Some of his cultured classmates criticized him for going to that kind of people. They said it would make the Seminary look bad. He was pleased, however, when he took many of his converts to the First Baptist Church and the church accepted them. Soon he developed a reputation among the students, Even though he failed Homiletics, Theology and New Testament, and he had to take them over, later some of his professors sent him out to preach. Unfortunately, the completing of his formal training was interrupted for several years by two years of work as a missionary among the Indians and two years as a pastor in Texas. We will describe those years later.

In 1881, while pastor at Dennison, Texas; he decided to return to the Seminary which by now was in Louisville, Kentucky. He wrote to Dr. Broadus about his interest, and was immediately called as pastor of the Portland Avenue Church in Louisville. It was a full-time church but the pay was only $250 a year, and he had to walk three miles to class twice a day and prepare two sermons a day, which he had never done before. He had to work very hard. During the two years he was there, Holt studied with men who became prominent leaders, including E.Y. Mullins. John R. Sampey, E. M. Poteat and T.T Eaton. When he finished all his courses except senior Greek and Hebrew, he wrote that Broadus told him he had all he needed for the ordinary ministry, so he left. What he did not say is that, in those days, most students never graduated. They could not pass Senior Greek and Hebrew. Also they had not developed a series of degrees comparable to what we have today, having only two diplomas: 1) Full Graduate. And 2) English Graduate.

Missionary to Indians

One of his early childhood memories in Somerset, Kentucky, was a visit from his uncle, Dr. H. F. Buckner, who was at the time a missionary to the Creek Indians. He gave A.J. his first knife and he idolized him, and assumed that one day he would be an Indian missionary. That day came while he was still in the Seminary, when he received from the Home Mission Board a commission as a missionary to

the Seminole Indians. He also received a letter from his uncle H. F. Buckner urging him to accept the appointment. Some years earlier Holt had met John Jumper (born 1810), the principal chief of the Seminole Indians and he used his influence with the Seminole Council to request Holt's appointment by the Board, the first such appointment. His professors, especially Dr. Toy, advised him to go. (Toy and Lottie Moon were once engaged.)

Holt left immediately for Eufaula, in Indian Territory where his uncle was, and his uncle met with him on horseback 80 miles west to where he was to work. The trip took several days and they started it without food or camping equipment. Holt was worn out long before his uncle was. They slept on the ground and were fed by Indian families whose whereabouts his uncle knew.

Holt quickly realized that a rugged life awaited his wife who was left behind until he got settled. He had told her it would be a hard life, but soon he realized it would be harder than he ever imagined. When they arrived at the home of John Jumper, he was assigned a crude log hit with cracks he had to seal. Immediately on returning to Eufaula he wrote to his wife asking her to ship their household effects and to come on the train.

His first task was to learn the Seminole language, learning much from James Factor, the first Seminole convert to Christianity. However, the first people among the Seminoles to accept Christianity were not the Seminoles themselves, but their black slaves. They had owned slaves in Florida, and some of their slaves went down to the Creek nation, heard Dr. Buckner preach, and were converted. They returned and shared their experiences with the Seminoles, but their emotional excitement and shouting alarmed the Indians, who concluded that they were bewitched. However, James Factor, a Seminole Indian leader, was converted. After holding a council, the Seminoles decided he was bewitched and expelled him from the council, but Factor held no grudge knowing that. Since most of them could not speak English, they did not know what was being said.

The winter of 1876 was very severe and Holt told of holding a watch night service on December 31. He preached and then rode a horse six miles home. He was informed the next morning that the meeting had lasted all night and that three women were converted, He was asked if he could return and baptize them. (He had gone home around midnight.) He returned to a place near Shawnee, Oklahoma, and went down to the creek where they had cut through a foot of ice to baptize these women. People stood on the ice.

Holt tells of a trip to the northern-most town in Indian territories the same winter. There were a dozen log cabins and he preached in the largest, around 16 x 18 feet. It had a huge fireplace and one bed. The meeting lasted until midnight and many were converted. Then the Indians slept on the floor while he slept on the one bed. When he got home his wife was ill, several feet of snow covered the woodpile, and they were out of food, He sent an Indian to market with his team, thinking he would be gone ten day at most. He was gone three weeks. The only thing they had to eat was sofka, and Indian dish made by boiling corn, allowing it to spoil some, and boiling it again. In desperation, he tried everything from walnuts to persimmons. The wagon finally brought enough to finish the winter.

In the winter of 1877 he went with a group of Seminoles to do mission work among the Wichitas, with the permission and protection from their chief. His description of the trip is classic. He asked his Indian traveling companions to take provisions for five days since they told him it would take that long. His wife fried him two chickens and a bunch of biscuits and put them in a pillowcase. The first night he spread his out, assuming they would do the same, but they did not. Instead, they ate all of his. He assumed they saved theirs for later. Except for a sack of green parched corn pounded into flour which John Jumper shared the next morning, he discovered they had nothing. For the next three days they had nothing to eat and, while he was too proud to admit it he was desperately hungry and weak, while the Indians showed no pain. Grass for horses was plentiful. On the fourth day he swallowed his pride, since he was so weak he could hardly mount his horse, and said to John Jumper, "Brother John, I am no Indian, and I must have some food." John seemed amused and said, "All ite, get um some." At noon, when they stopped for the horses to graze. John picked up some dry weeds and piled them up, and then kicked around in the grass until he found a terrapin (tortoise). He said to Holt. "Him good." Then they set fire to the pile of weeds. To Holt's amazement, John threw the terrapin in the fire live, then put more sticks on it. When it burned

down to ashes, he poked in the ashes with a stick until he pushed the terrapin out, turned it on its back and cut the underside loose with a knife and presented it to Holt, saying, "Smellum." To him it smelled like stewed chicken. He offered to share, but they politely declined, for which Holt was most grateful. He ate it all except for a few bones, and he licked them clean. He was still hungry, but gained strength immediately.

The next day they went down a canyon to a stream. The Indians were ecstatic. "Fish!" they said. "If only we had hooks." Holt had two hooks in the lapel of his coat. "But," he said, "we have no line." Jumper replied, "White man know nothing," and went over to the horses and had some look for grasshoppers, while he plaited lined from horsehair from the horses' tails. Without corks, sinkers or poles, they had two bushels of bass in no time. They spread them out after throwing them in the fire whole and John Jumper said, "Ask a blessing, preacher." Five men ate two bushels of bass. That day A.J. Holt learned to eat like an Indian.

When they arrived at the Indian agency they met Andrew Williams, the agent, who was responsible for 12 Indian tribes, including several language groups. The most common language group was Comanche. Holt soon learned that word of his coming had spread among them of John Jumper (well-known among them) and a white "Father-Talker" who were coming. They selected a broad prairie near Sugar Creek and the Washita River and built a brush arbor. When it was ready many crowds came. By 9 A.M. on Sunday there were over a thousand, with interpreters in each group. He told the story of redemption from creation to the crucifixion. It took all day. When he got to the crucifixion, one old Indian gave a loud cry of indignation, "Wah."

When he gave the invitation, a tall painted and feathered Indian came forward and began to talk excitedly. The interpreter became confused by their many questions, and he cut the confusion short with a prayer. When the interpreter announced the prayer, they all fell on their faces. Holt said he never prayed with such earnestness. When the prayer ended, the Indian who came forward picked Holt up and carried him around in his arms like a baby. After a song, the Seminoles gave him the right hand of fellowship. The meeting continued for a week and by the second Sunday they had a big baptizing at Sugar Creek. The converts included a number of Indian chiefs.

After the meeting ended, Holt asked Agent Williams if he would welcome a missionary from the Domestic Indian Board. After being told he would be pleased, Holt wrote to the Board (in Marion, Alabama, at the time), and returned home. He found the 70-mile return trip easier since the agent had bread and beef enough for them all. At home he found his nine-year-old son Willie near death, with no doctor or near neighbors available. He died during the night. The next morning Holt built a rude coffin and a neighbor, who had heard of the sick child, arrived and dug a grave, and attended a brief funeral conducted by John Jumper and a few Seminoles. Holt's grief was beyond description, but eventually he pulled himself together.

Missionary to the Wild Indians

Shortly he received the news that he had been appointed to mission work among the tribes he had visited. When he announced his decision to the Seminoles, he was not prepared for their response. They felt betrayed and rejected, but gradually became reconciled. When he was loading his wagon to go where no wagon had been, he received a letter from his uncle, Dr. Buckner, warning him that the wild Indians would not hear him.

The trip was uneventful except for an encounter with a panther at a creek and some difficulty getting his wagon across the creek. When he arrived at the Indian Agency, he was assigned a log cabin and was welcomed by the small Indian church. He stayed and worked three years. The first thing he did was to learn the Comanche language because it was the most widely used language. He did it by going through a Webster's Dictionary and with the help of an interpreter he had used earlier; he entered the nearest Comanche equivalent by each word. It took over a month. Then he memorized the dictionary in three months. He found that putting the word into order was more complicated and he regaled the Indians with many blunders, but he finally mastered it. Then he learned their sign language which was more

widely used than the Comanche language among other tribes. Later he reduced the verbal language to sign language and the Smithsonian published it.

The next task he took on was building a church, securing help from W. N. Chaudoin, an agent for the Home Missions Board in Georgia, and from his Indian friends. It took a year to get all the materials together. The most promising tribe in receiving the gospel was the Waco tribe whose chief, Buffalo Good, reported the story of his ancestors who predicted that some day a white father talker would come and tell them about the great father. He told of Cortez who worshiped a cross. He said, "I want my children to believe and be baptized." Holt was glad but he was reluctant to pressure the chief because he knew that many would follow him, and many of the Indians were polygamists. For that reason he never made much headway among the Comanche. One tribe, the Tonkaways, were cannibals, but cannibalism was not approved by most tribes, and failing in their efforts to discourage the practice, they exterminated the Tonkaways.

While his work with the "wild Indians" was on the whole successful, Holt experienced a series of crises that eventually led to the end of his mission work among the Indians.

The first crises came when an Indian girl attending the Agency school heard Holt preach and wanted to be baptized. The school was run by Quaker teacher Henry Daws and he not only refused permission for her to be baptized, but threatened her with imprisonment as well. In response, Indian Agent Williams, who respected Holt, dismissed Daws and employed Holt as his replacement. Reluctantly Holt accepted the appointment. Apparently Daws had some influence elsewhere for, a month later, a directive came from Washington ordering Williams to dismiss Holt, to reinstate Daws, and to instruct Holt to leave the reservation.

Holt wrote a letter of protest to Washington, left his wife and family in the care of an Indian friend and rode 300 miles on horseback to Dallas. En route he learned that he had been credited with bringing an end to the raids by the Comanche on Texas settlers, since the raids stopped when he arrived at the Agency. After a week's preaching trip, arranged by his uncle H. F. Buckner, a telegram from Washington came, reporting that his dismissal was based on misinformation and reinstating him. Unfortunately, word of his reinstatement to the Indian Agency also included instructions to terminate the employees who made trouble. Out of spite, they burned the agency headquarters. The terminated employees then spread the rumor that Holt was indirectly responsible for the burning of the agency and many believed it. In response, one of the Indian chiefs organized a war council of chiefs to discuss his case. One after another spoke against him, but by the time Holt had about lost hope, Toshua, principle chief of the Comanche spoke. Though quite old, he straightened himself to his full height and said:

> Indians much big fools. When soldiers come, Indians grin. Soldiers come to kill Indians. When traders come, Indians grin. Traders come to cheat Indians. Here come one white man not to kill Indians, not to cheat Indians; government no send him. He come to love Indian. He come to make Indian big happy. Government no pay him. Indians no pay him. Cost Indian nothing. Now Indian want to drive him out. Indian one big fool. Indian want to keep soldier to kill him; want to keep trader to cheat him. The only white man in all the world that want to help Indian be good, happy, well, to bless Indian always; that tell Indian how to be happy here; how to be happy after Indian dead: now Indian want to drive him out. Indian big dam fool. I see that white man when he sat; I eat with that white man. Indian eat with soldier? No. Indian eat with trader? No. Indian eat with teacher? No. All too good to eat with Indian. That white man the only white man that is good. Indian want to drive him out. Indian big fool.

That speech turned the tide and, though the vote to keep him was not unanimous, it passed by a large majority, and he returned to resume his missionary endeavors.

However, two other crises eventually led to his decision to bring his work among the Indians to an end. One was an assassination attempt by an Indian. Holt knew the Indian, Keeche Joe, who made the attempt. Joe was hired to kill Holt, but Holt never learned why. Yet Holt's response to the incident is

fascinating. It happened while Holt and a Negro friend were on their way to visit Buffalo Good, an old chief dying from tuberculosis. When Joe fired at Holt, the Negro, Scoot Conley, started to run, but Holt stopped him and said, "Not a word of this to Mrs. Holt. Since he is a good shot and he missed, he will think my medicine is stronger than his, and will not try it again." Later Joe came to see Holt to sing Indian songs with him, and Holt learned that Joe had broken relations with those who hired him. However, word of the attempt on his life came to the attention of the Home Mission Board and he was encouraged to resign.

A second event was not directly related to the attempt but it was part of the larger picture. There was growing unrest among the Indians because of some violations of propriety by the military in isolated incidents. For example, Holt reported that a Cheyenne Indian woman was killed by a soldier on guard duty because she did not understand his command. An Indian friend named Long Hat, an arrow maker who once had visited President Grant, confided in Holt and told him that several tribes had called a war council to discuss what response they should make. They were considering revenge. Holt asked him to talk peace, warning him that war would bring more deaths, acknowledged that the Indians had been mistreated, and promised to write to Washington about the incident. Long Hat promised to try but, on returning from the council, he told Holt of a plan to massacre the garrison at Reno. Holt then asked permission to warn the Indian Agent Colonel Hunt. Long Hat agreed with the proviso that Holt would not tell where he got the information. Colonel Hunt tried in vain to get Holt to tell where he got the information and, refusing to believe it, did nothing to prevent it. The garrison was massacred, with only two men escaping. Years later Holt met on e of them, and Colonel Hunt who said, "I can never forgive myself for the way I treated you." Holt forgave him, but Hunt said he could never forgive himself.

Later the Home Mission Board wrote him that, in view of the increasing unrest, it would be safer if he could be replaced by an Indian missionary, although he had no fear and was encouraged by Dr. Crawford Toy and J.R. Graves to continue. For the sake of his family, however, he reluctantly resigned. He left the work in 1879, including the graves of two of his children, one of which was buried in John Jumper's graveyard (Willie). At his last meeting with the Creek Association, his Indian friends gave him an Indian name, "Bear Heart."

Secretary of Missions in Texas

When they learned of the end of his missionary work among the Indians, the Baptist General Association of Texas asked him to come back to Texas and do mission work on the frontier. He agreed and moved to Denison, Texas, and worked among the frontier settlers for two years, facing hardships but no danger. Then the church at Denison became vacant and Holt was called as pastor. For a time he divided his time between pasturing the church and doing frontier missions. After two years of this work he returned to the Seminary and completed his work there, as I mentioned earlier.

After completing his seminary, he returned to Dallas, Texas and looked up his uncle, R. C. Buckner. The state was terribly divided with sectional fractions, rival schools and newspapers. B. H. Carroll had pleaded for unity in 1883, and so did Holt in 1884. By 1886, Buckner invited Holt to meet with the Executive Board of the General Association, one of the groups, and Holt was asked to open the meeting with prayer. The main item on the agenda was fund-raising to pay the salaries of six missionaries which were past due. They asked Holt if he would undertake to raise the money. He agreed to serve as financial agent for two months for $200, and promised that if he could not raise the money, he would not expect to be paid. He raised $1150, more than enough. Later, according to J. M. Carroll, on the motion of B. H. Carroll, he was elected Superintendent of Missions for the Baptist General Association of Texas, the first such officer.

At the time of his election, Texas was divided into two separate Baptist organizations: the State Convention in Southern Texas, and the General Association in the Northern section. Holt was very successful in this new venture and played a significant role in two events: 1) Moving the responsibility for collecting mission offerings from the Superintendent to the churches; and 2) uniting the two groups under a new name, "The Baptist General Convention of Texas." According to his auto biography, Holt worked as superintendent for six years before the uniting of the two groups in 1886, and for six years after the

unification. He recalled that throughout these years he kept his own books, did his own correspondence and writing after buying the first typewriter he ever saw, and learning to use it.

He also recalled that when he was elected Corresponding Secretary of the united Convention, it was in debt, and the Southern group felt neglected. When he made one of his first visits to the Southern section in the San Marcos Association, he arrived there too late to accept the invitation of visitors for seat in the body, so was ignored (their new Superintendent of Missions). Later, however, when the subject of missions came up, he took the floor and spoke. When he sat down he was introduced and had no more trouble.

During his last years in Texas he became a partner in the publication of the *Texas Baptist and Herald*, which may have contributed to his decision to bring his work in Texas to an end. He only put money into the paper, but it proved a mistake, because the editor was an authoritarian personality always trying to correct everyone, and Holt, as part-owner, had to share the blame. He also lost $4000 trying to bail out his partner. Holt sold his interest in the paper to Dr. S. A. Hayden but, by that time, it had not only cost him money but influence, as well. At the next meeting of the Convention, J. B. Cranfill ran against him for election as Superintendent. Holt won by a two-thirds majority but Holt didn't want to fight the one-third, so he resigned after serving Texas Baptists for a total of 12 years. He was also very tired.

Secretary of Missions in Tennessee

While in Texas Holt had invested in some wild land near Henrietta, Texas, which became valuable because the railroad came near it. Part of it was also developed into a rock quarry. He sold his land and decided to travel. He took a whole year touring England and the near east at a leisurely pace, writing letters to two Baptist papers for pay. He also wrote a book, *Miriam Heth*, on his trip. He told of hearing Charles Spurgeon preach, and said there was no organ, the singing was terrible, but Spurgeon's preaching made up for it.

When he returned form abroad in 1890, he went back to Texas and engaged a number of short-term ventures in Texas and Arkansas, with varying success. Most of them gave him little sense of fulfillment that he needed, with a few exceptions. One was his service on the committee that was responsible for the creation of the Sunday School Board. Another was the publication of a paper, *A Voice in the Wilderness*, which received wide circulation in East Texas. A third activity from which he derived some satisfaction during his last years in Texas was the organization of a Minister's Institute, bringing in some of the best lecturers, including B. H. Carroll and J. M. Carroll.

Finally he accepted a call to be pastor of the First Baptist Church of Palestine, Texas. He was there only a few months when he was invited to become Corresponding Secretary for the Tennessee Baptist Convention. He accepted immediately despite the financial problems they had. The Convention was $3,000 in debt, and had five field secretaries to pay, and most banks were closed. Moreover, the Convention had no office, no records, and no system of accounting. But the Board gave him strong support. The first thing he did was to borrow money to pay off the missionaries. Then he secured office space for the *Baptist and Reflector* (the state paper), put in a desk and his typewriter, and created files and a bookkeeping system.

Next he began to visit leading churches and every denominational meeting to promote the work. One major problem here, like Texas, was the division of the state. It had recently achieved unity but the three sections of the state still reflected the old divisions. Holt tried to transform the apparent unity into a real one and even wrote a song, "Old Tennessee," set to the tune of "Beulah Land." The song became popular but it failed to end the spirit of division. One reason it persisted was the strong opposition from J. N. Hall, an editor in Kentucky, who published a paper which was widely read in Tennessee. He was strongly opposed to mission organization. Holt debated his representative when he came to Tennessee and won, but becoming involved in the controversy was wearing.

Next came the Whitsett controversy over the question of when baptism by immersion was adopted by the early Baptists. Holt thought the issue should be kept off the Convention floor and

succeeded in doing so. There was also dissension over organization and, even though Holt combined some of the agencies and reduced the numbers of organizations, he was constantly attacked by Hall whose paper was widely circulated in Tennessee. He called Holt the "Boss" secretary, and after nine years in Tennessee, although he liberated the Convention and the Orphanage from debt, he grew tired of fighting. Also, his wife's health was poor, and his doctors urged him to move to a warmer climate. Thus, in 1902, he ended his service to the Tennessee Baptist Convention.

To Texas and Back

Having a daughter in Nacogdoches, where he had served as pastor before, when he received a call from the church he returned to Texas. There he found the anti-mission movement at its height and he learned that 12 churches in the local association planned to pull out and organize an anti-mission association. Holt was asked to help prevent it and, after arrangements were made by friends for him to preach in each of the churches, the movement was stopped and the churches stayed in the association. Also while he was in Texas he learned that a man in his church was anti-Board and he wanted the church to pull out of the Convention. Since he knew the man's view did not represent the views of his church, when the time came for the church to appoint messengers, Holt recommended to the church that he not be appointed. Instead, the church appointed Holt's wife, whose views were in line with those of the church.

The final event in his last years in Texas was his participation with the Methodists in the Prohibition campaign. They won, thus ending 100 years of legal alcohol. Near the end of his stay in Texas, he had an attack of asthma and almost lost his voice. Even his doctors were alarmed. Then he received a telegram saying he had been elected President of Tennessee Baptist Normal College in the mountains of East Tennessee. Suddenly he decided that the mountains would be good for his voice. Thus, without mentioning his wife's health, he decided to go. Unfortunately it was a college in name only. Someone had given them some property and, as soon as he got the name changed to Tennessee College and got a faculty together, he encountered such opposition from Carson Newman that he thought it had no chance of success and resigned. The college moved to Murfreesboro, however, and survives to this day as Union University.

Meanwhile, the Third Baptist Church of Knoxville wanted him as pastor. He accepted and served the church four years. He had the name changed to South Knoxville and enjoyed some of the happiest years of his ministry, especially after dismissing a deacon who had made trouble for 15 years. Unfortunately, while serving there, his wife became ill with catarrah (sinus-allergy) and her doctors recommended moving to Florida. The mountain air seemed good for him but bad for her.

Last Years in Florida

On learning of his availability, L. D. Geiger asked him to come to Florida and edit their paper. He came then to the State Convention at Defuniak Springs and made a proposal, but it was not accepted. He received a call to come to Lake City as pastor, however, and accepted. Columbia College had just been established there (1907) and shortly after he accepted the church H. W. Tribble came as President.

His wife's health problems disappeared here, and he taught a Sunday School class under an oak tree (no room in the church) which grew as large as the rest of the Sunday School. However, the church developed financial problems and fell behind on his pay which was $100 a month. He confronted the treasurer directly and stated that they could not live on what they were receiving, and that they would have to move. Then they spent a day in prayer, and the next day a letter came inviting him to come to Chickasha, Oklahoma as pastor, offering $200 a month. Although Lake City countered and offered a raise, he went to Oklahoma. After a year at Chickasha, he was called to the Washington Avenue Church in Oklahoma, to serve also as editor of the state paper, *The Baptist Oklahoman*, in which he acquired a majority of the stock. Soon he gave up the church and devoted his full time to the paper. Shortly thereafter he was elected President of the Convention and re-elected the following year. Unfortunately the

paper got into serious economic difficulty and Holt lost over $10,000. The property was seized and the paper died. Going back to Oklahoma proved a bad experience for Holt.

Leaving Oklahoma he went back to Texas to visit his daughter. While there he received a call to come to Kissimmee, Florida, and moved there in 1911. He stayed there for five years and enjoyed some of the happiest years of his life. The church grew and he found time to write a series of articles in *Baptist World* about his 48 years in the ministry.

Also while in Kissimmee he was asked by the owners of the *Witness* to edit a column each week. His column became very popular and led to is being asked to be one of five editors of the paper. Each editor would edit one issue each month. The other editors were W. A. Hobson, C. W. Duke and C. E. W. Dobbs. Then they elected him editor-in-chief and asked him to move to Arcadia where the paper was published. He found the offer attractive for it allowed him freedom to preach as much or as little as he chose. He had bought a house and 15 acres of land at Kissimmee, and sold them at profit.

Shortly after moving to Arcadia, he was called to serve the church at Boca Grande and, with his salary as editor, he lived well. Not long after going to Arcadia, however, the proprietors of the paper gave it back to the Convention, and he was called to and accepted the church at Arcadia, and served it until he was almost 80 years old.

During his last years as pastor at Arcadia, he played a significant role in the life of the Florida Baptist Children's Home which was at Arcadia at the time. Also during his years as pastor at Arcadia, he became a prominent leader among Florida Baptists and a popular preacher and teacher among all ages at the DeLand Assembly, held on the campus of Stetson University each summer. In his last years he reflected on his long ministry and recalled attending 50 state conventions and 37 sessions of the Southern Baptist Convention. It is interesting to note, in the light of recent SBC controversies, that Holt reports that he was the first chairman of the committee on committees, which marked the transition in 1918 from the former custom of leaving the president to appoint committees to having a committee on committees do the work. He was still writing and speaking in 1923, and delivered the Founder's Day Address at Southern Seminary on January 11, 1923, at the request of E. Y. Mullins.

It is difficult for me to evaluate his life with confidence because I do not have his correspondence or the evaluation of his enemies or even of many of his friends. What I have read, though, seems to justify some summary comments, most of which are complimentary. First, he raised a fine family, fathering 13 children, only 6 of which were alive when he died. His first wife was Alice Markham, mentioned earlier, who died four years after their marriage. Three children were born to them. His second wife was Emma Dennis with whom he lived 58 years. His surviving children included 1) Mrs. Annie Pentecost, of Brenham, Texas, child of his first wife: 2) Mrs. R. P. Lockey, Nacogdoches, Texas: 3) Major J. B. Holt, Vicksburg, Mississippi: 4) Carroll Holt, Port Arthur, Texas: 5) Mrs. J. L. Wall, Memphis, Tennessee, and 6) Miss Verna Holt, Arcadia, Florida.

Second, he was a very capable minister and writer and a very hard worker, widely known throughout the Southern Baptist Convention. He reflected that he had served as editor of Baptist papers and published articles in many others, as well.

Third, it appears that he was a strong personality and a complex one. On the one hand he was very good at reconciling individuals and groups. On the other hand, he was often involved in controversy, sometimes winning and sometimes losing and, at other times, tiring of the fight. In his last years, as he reflected on his long ministry, he wrote that if he had his life to live over, he would have avoided most of the controversies in which he became involved. His long ministry was a mixture of long tenure in several instances and fast moves in other cases. Usually his reasons for moving seemed reasonable, but occasionally they seemed impulsive.

Finally, in the opinion of this writer, he was a great man of God and a man of integrity. After he died on May 15, 1933, and was buried in Oak Ridge Cemetery near Arcadia, Dean Adcock wrote of him that "If Diogenes had met him, he would have blown out his candle; if the prophet had seen him, he would have been satisfied with the answer to his call." (*Florida Baptist Witness*, 6-14-34.)

Bibliography

1. Robert Baker, *The Blossoming Desert: A Concise History of Texas Baptists*. (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1970).

2. J. M. Carroll, *A History of Texas Baptists*, (Dallas: Baptist Standard Publishing Company, 1923).

3. L. J. Elliott. Editor. *Centennial Story of Texas Baptists*, (Dallas: Baptists General Convention of Texas, 1936).

4. A.J. Holt, *Pioneering in the Southwest*, (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1923).