

# under the sun

## Still Preaching—After All These Years

BY SUSAN USHER

Thomas H. (Tom) Williams preached the gospel 66 of his 87 years, and probably has a few years behind the pulpit still ahead of him.

But one sunny afternoon last week, that's not what he was doing. The Rev. Williams was sitting in a brown, wooden skiff, his red, billed cap pulled well over his eyes and eyeglasses. The angled sun glinted off the artificial "baiter" he had flipped out across Lockwood's Folly River toward the bank and was leading back in short, expert tins.

Fall green cypress leaned over the river and beds of pickersweed congregated along both banks. Blue-spiked flowers tall above the leaves. Fiddler crabs rustled along the path that led to the little boat and its occupant.

It wasn't a good afternoon for fishing; the wind was too strong from the south. Williams announced as he pulled closer to shore to continue the conversation. (Something "went wrong" with his hearing a few years ago, he explained.)

Picking up an artificial lure, he grinned like a part-

ner in mischief and said, "You fool 'em with this."

"You do that," he said, flipping the line out again, "and before you know it, you've got a big bass on it or a jack and a jack fights harder than a bass."

"I've caught some giants of both on this river," Williams was a slip of a boy, in the fourth grade, when he first felt the stirrings of his call to the ministry. At first he wasn't sure what was happening. He discussed it with his preacher, who announced to anybody and everybody from the pulpit that Little Tom Williams was going to be a preacher.

Not everybody accepted the idea, said Williams, since he was a "good" little boy, shy, quiet-spoken and not one people thought would ever have enough words or voice for preaching.

Today, he said, some of those same people speak highly of his preaching and come to him for help in understanding "the deep questions" of the Bible.

He moved the boat again and pointed toward a curve on the bank behind him. "You can take a trot line and put hooks on it about four feet apart and run it bet-

ween this point and that other one and let the line go in the curve," he said, "and you'll catch catfish."

Williams returned only recently to Brunswick County, to a mobile home near the C.O. Blanton place in Supply. The red clay and rocky fields of the Piedmont didn't suit him like the coast, though the ministry has often led him inland.

Williams grew up just above the Lockwood's Folly River on N.C. 211. He marks its length with descriptive terms such as the Glue Shed, Turkey Pen, Log Landing and Dinner Spring.

Still, he recollected, "there wasn't as much time for fishing as you might think. My father (Benjamin Franklin Williams) kept me working either on the farm or at the mill."

The mill stood at a spot near the bridge where a natural artesian flow piped to a surface spigot continues its steady drip.

From the time he went to wearing kneepants, said Williams, he helped fire the mill where board lumber and shingles were milled, cotton ginned and corn ground. On Saturdays, Williams worked with just Peyton Holden, a miller, grinding corn for people who came from miles and miles around.

In between work he went to school and also to church at Mt. Pisgah Baptist.

At age 21, he was called to his first church, at Bolivia. It was for only three months; he had to return to school. His family not able to help out, Williams worked his way through Buies Creek Academy (now Campbell University) and Wake Forest College. Later he was minister at New Life Baptist Church in the county.

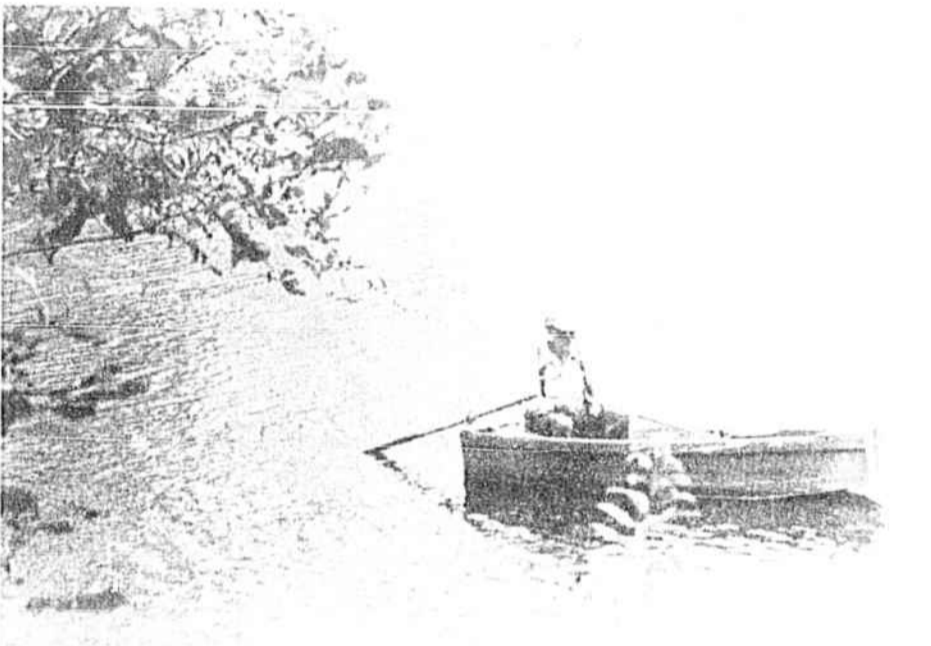
Since leaving the area, recalled Williams, he has helped pull back together seven or eight splintered churches before his retirement.

"I retired six times," he said with something resembling a laugh. "I tried to retire the first time in 1962."

But a church called him to "help out."



REV. TOM WILLIAMS, age 87, recently retired from the ministry—for the sixth time.



LEISURELY PREPARING to cast his line, the longtime Baptist minister enjoys an afternoon on the Lockwood's Folly River.

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