

# Southside Roots

## Church Among Few Remnants Of African-American Community

By Claudia Kovar  
World Staff Writer

Although South Tulsa is known for its large homes and affluent residents, a deeper look at the history of the area reveals a more modest past with ties to Indian relocation and the abolition of slavery.

The area of Harvard Avenue between 81st and 91st streets once was home to several hundred African-Americans who called their community Rentie Grove.

It was named for the Rentie family, which owned a large acreage at 91st Street and Harvard Avenue, said Arnold Williams, 69, son of Rodger and Elvira (Rentie) Williams and nephew of Mrs. Georgia (Rentie) Walker, the last Rentie to own the land.

Some of the African-Americans acquired the land after an 1898 law was passed allocating land to the Indians and their former slaves. The allotments were issued in 1903 and included land in South Tulsa that had been given to the Creek Nation.

The slaves were brought to Oklahoma with the Creeks, Cherokees and other tribes in the 1830s during the relocations, which included the Trail of Tears.

"That is one of the things that most people don't realize — that even the Indians had slaves," Williams said.

Williams said his grandfather, Stephen Rentie, was a Creek freedman. Stephen Rentie's allotment included land now occupied by Jenks Public Schools and home owners in several adjoining neighborhoods.

Jenks Public Schools has named a nature preserve between Jenks East Elementary and Jenks East Middle Schools after the Rentie family. It is called Rentie Grove Preserve.

Williams said a member of the Rentie family also may be the namesake for the town of Rentiesville near Checotah.

The community of Rentie Grove had a Baptist church, a Methodist church, a small store and gas station and a school.

The quaint, one-room Baptist church built in 1905 has had several owners since the Rentie Grove Baptist Church sold it in 1977 and re-established itself in North Tulsa at 1951 N. Lansing Ave. The old Rentie Grove Baptist Church building now is home of the Zion Christian Center.

Williams said the church was included in a Smithsonian Institute television special on the history of African-American churches called "Climbing Jacob's Ladder" and also in a related exhibit at Tulsa Junior College's Southeast Campus.

Williams owns photographs taken in about 1912 of his parents standing with their classmates in front of the Rentie Grove School that sat on the northwest corner of 81st Street and Harvard Avenue.

About 35 students attended the three-room school that was used to educate children in all grades.

A small store and one-pump gas station was situated on the southeast corner near the Methodist church.

Williams, a retired Tulsa Public Schools music instructor, See Rentie Grove on 2

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America, and rock is a rarity in the supermarkets. But with baby boomers having come of age, one only can expect that more of their music will be played in places where they are invited to spend money.

It may not be long before grocery retailers alter this trend to maximize the benefits to themselves. Any day now, some little wise guy with an MBA might pipe up at a board meeting and say, "If we are going to play all this classic rock in our stores, why don't we concentrate on playing songs about food and songs by bands that have food names?"

Power of suggestion could be heightened by playing different music

## ...Rentie Grove

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grew up and still resides in North Tulsa, but he remembers holiday visits to his aunt's Rentie Grove home.

"It was a self-contained farming community," he said. "Many homes had gardens and fruit trees. I distinctly remember picking peas in the pea patches during the Depression."

Photographs of his aunt's home reveal a well-manicured lawn with flowering bushes and wide-open spaces where now there are homes and businesses.

"There were sugar-cane fields and sweet potatoes that grew this big," Williams said, indicating the size of a football. "There were watermelons and cantaloupes, but very little cotton in that area."

"I remember church socials with planks set on saw horses filled with the most fantastic foods — jelly cakes three and four layers high."

Families still gather at the small Rentie Grove Community Cemetery near 95th Street and South Harvard Avenue on Memorial Day. Williams said that within the past few years he had to fight to save the cemetery from being wiped out by the construction of the Creek Turnpike and also from an attempt to make that part of Harvard Avenue a private, gated road.

Williams said many of the Rentie Grove residents worked in Tulsa as laborers. He said some worked at a coal mine near where the Tulsa Fairgrounds is now.

Former Rentie Grove resident Dorothy Thompson said many residents worked at a dairy near 91st Street and Harvard Avenue. Her brother, Paul Washington, recalled working on a cotton farm across from the Booker T. Washington Cemetery, located on 91st Street east of Harvard Avenue. The cemetery is still there, but the cotton farm is now an upscale housing subdivision.

Longtime residents moved out during the 1960s and 1970s. Some say the exodus was because the school was closed. Others say it was because offers for the land

became too good to refuse as Tulsa grew southward.

The North Tulsa Rentie Grove Baptist Church is planning to celebrate its 88th anniversary in November, said the Rev. W.B. Rowland, who has been pastor since 1975 — two years before the church sold its original building and moved to North Tulsa.

Rowland lived in Rentie Grove as a child with his parents, Tucker and Adlee.

"I remember going to school in the old three-room school building in the late 1940s," Rowland said.

"At one time it had 12 grades, but when I went there, it only had classes through the seventh grade. Students then were bussed to Carver Junior High and then to Booker T. Washington High School."

Rowland, who graduated from Washington in 1957, said he remembers the one-mile walk to the bus stop and the long ride to the North Tulsa schools before integration.

He said his father was a sharecropper and the crops grown in the area included corn, soy beans, alfalfa, hay and oats.

Rowland said he also remembers "stomping the silos" to pack down wheat at the Allen Ranch in Bixby.

He said he remembers packed church services during which the men sat on one side of the aisle and the women sat on the other. He also recalls church socials, playing baseball in a nearby field and being baptized in a pond near the Methodist church.

He said about 30 families may have lived there when he was growing up. Many families had 10 or more children. But when he returned in 1975, attendance at the church was less than 10 people a week. Despite his efforts to organize a bus ministry to bring children from North Tulsa to the church, the decision was made to sell the building.

"I couldn't really tell you why (the people moved)," he said. "I think it may

have had something to do with the fact that they may have paid only \$50 an acre for their land, and when they realized they could get 300 percent more, it took it."

Rowland's father, Tucker, 84, said remembers the dirt roads that were oil and became slick when it rained.

"In Rentie Grove, the houses were pretty close together," the elder Rowland said. "Some people owned a half-acre some a fourth, others had maybe an acre."

He said the neighbors were very friendly and life was peaceful there.

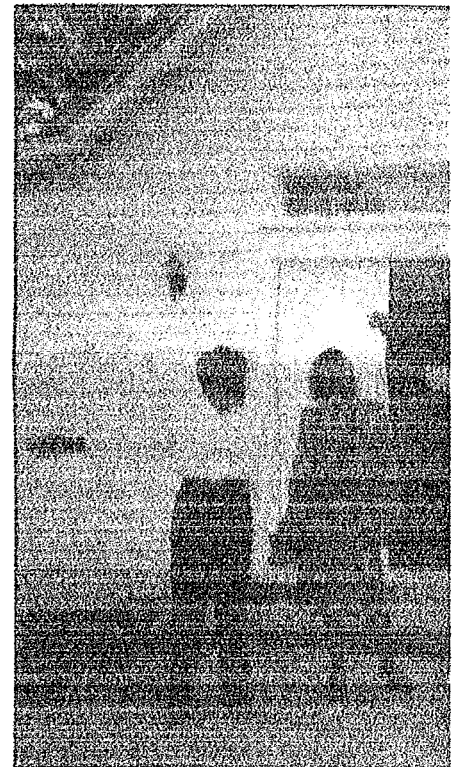
Several people who were interviewed for this story said they hope the original Rentie Grove Baptist Church building will be put on the National Registry of Historic Places.

of alcoholic beverages also would relate to Eric Burdon's "Spill the Wine." The music of Creedence Clearwater Revival might inspire bottled water sales.

Cream could be featured in the dairy aisle. Plenty of air time there also could go to John C. Loudermilk and Paul Butterfield.

Selections in the bakery could include Don MacLean's "American Pie" and anything by Vanilla Fudge, Sugarloaf and Bread.

Music for the gourmet foods section could include the Beatles' "Savory Truffle," cuts from the Rolling Stones album "Goat's Head Soup" and anything by Ambrosia.



Four members of the old Rentie Grove Baptist Church last week in front of what is now the Zion Christian Church building. From left are Dorothy Thompson, Rean Rowland. They are joined Zion Christian and Schubert's wife, Cathy.

## Newcomers Will Meet at Jenks Park on Monday

Newcomers to Tulsa are invited to a picnic at 10 a.m. Monday at Jenks Park at Elm Street and Main Street.

The event is one of many sponsored by the Tulsa Newcomers Club, said Barbara Canary. People who attend should bring their own food. Children can participate in a riding toy decorating contest.

The group also is planning a group tour of the Tulsa Zoo. Interested persons should bring their lunch and meet at the polar bear building at 10 a.m. Sept. 17.

Canary said the play group is composed mainly of mothers with small children. Anyone new to the Tulsa metropolitan area is invited.



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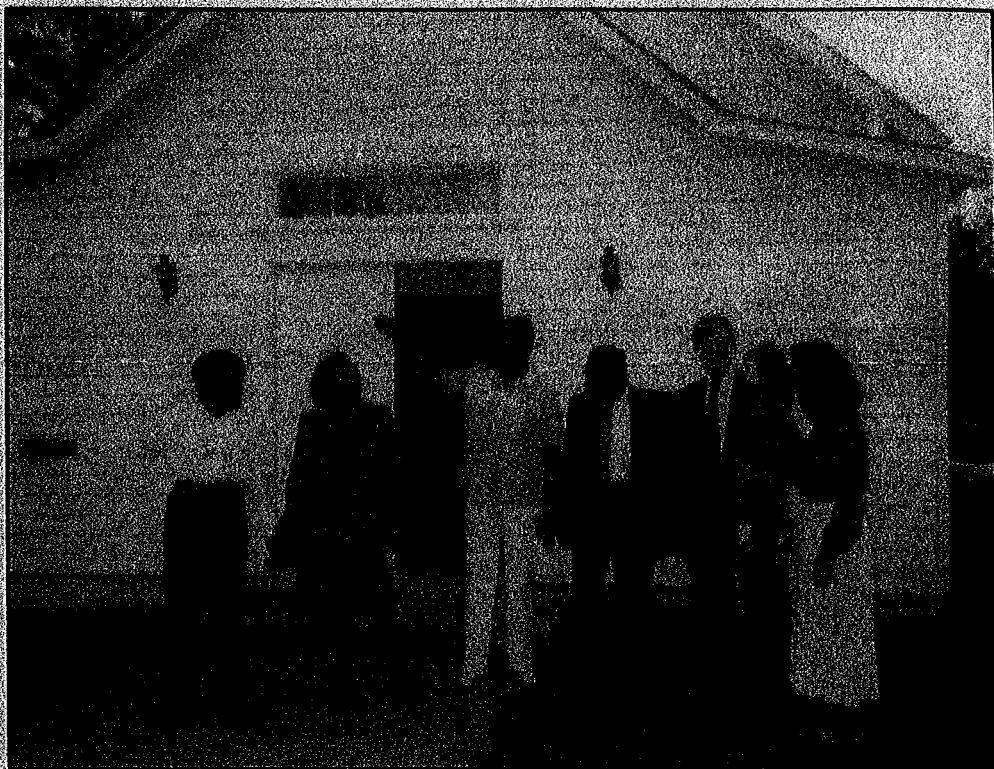
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Community World staff photo by Claudia Kovar

Four members of the old Rentie Grove Baptist Church discuss the location of old landmarks last week in front of what is now the Zion Christian Center, 8350 S. Harvard Ave. Pictured from left are Dorothy Thompson, Reamer Woods, Paul Washington, the Rev. W. B. Rowland. They are joined Zion Christian Center Pastor Steve Schubert, his daughter, Sarah, and Schubert's wife, Cathy.

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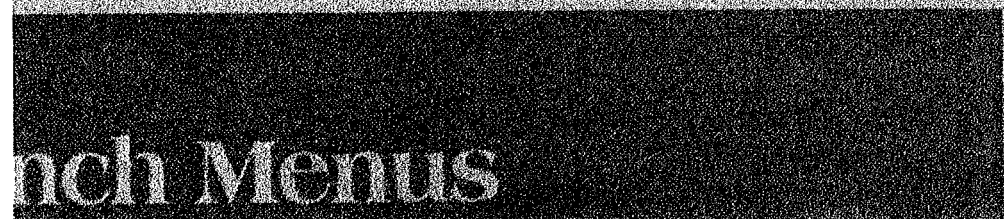
Several people who were interviewed for this story said they hope the original Rentie Grove Baptist Church building will be put on the National Registry of His-

toric Places someday.

Tulsa Historical Society curator Robert Powers said he would like to see that happen, too.

Powers said the historic designation would not prevent the building's owner from moving it or tearing it down, but it would protect the building from any government action.

It also would recognize one of the few remnants of the area's early 20th century history.



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## Rentie Grove Revisited

Another link to Tulsa's past has given way to progress, while another faces a brighter tomorrow.

Rentie Grove was an all-black community founded around the turn of the century in the area of what is now 81st Street and Harvard Avenue.

Among the last remnants of Rentie Grove was a rock wall on the northwest corner of that intersection. Street

community stretched from 71st to 91st streets along Harvard. He recalled that a Methodist church stood along 83rd Street at the site of a Safeway store today.

Rentie Grove had its own post office from 1904 until 1909.

In "Tune of the Hickory Stick," a history of Jenks Public Schools by Joyce Elliott Nichols, Rentie Grove is described as a "black



*A latter-day photo of the Baptist church in Rentie Grove, near 83rd Street and Harvard Avenue.*

improvements and an intersection-widening project begun during the winter claimed the wall that ringed the grounds of the Rentie Grove school.

The school closed in 1955, a casualty of integration. The wooden structure remained until the early '60s when it gave way to suburbia. And, with it went Rentie Grove.

The final physical link to Rentie Grove is due a more honorable fate. The white frame Baptist church that has stood abandoned and alone on the west side of Harvard near 83rd Street is about to be given a second life.

Hugh and Pearl Fassett recently purchased the structure and the three-acre plot on which it stands. Fassett is pastor of the Zion Christian Church and he plans to restore the wooden building to its original state (with heating and air conditioning added) to house his congregation.

Arnold Williams is the unofficial historian for Rentie Grove. It was his home as a youngster. He said that the

community composed of mainly farmers, laborers and household workers who lived along Harvard Avenue on the Freedmen allotments of Stephen and Luthis Rentie.

When Rentie Grove school was closed, the children attended Jenks schools. Jenks East Campus (elementary school and middle school) is located on the northeast corner of 91st and Harvard, site of the first Rentie Grove general store.

"Tune of the Hickory Stick" also included the following passage:

"A pitcher pump that served the school, as well as the water needs of most of the families in the Rentie Grove area, sat atop a concrete slab that rested about two feet above the ground. The slab set back from the intersection at an angle that allowed horse-drawn wagons to pull off the roadway and fill their barrels and tubs for household use from the pump. The pump stood for many years after the school was abandoned." □