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## Book Review: Rock Beneath the Sand: Country Churches in Texas

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Central Texas, a handful of country churches stand as relics of a long-ago time of family farms, tiny crossroads towns, and dynamic ethnic and racial diversity. Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Cumberland Presbyterian, Church of Christ, Evangelical, and Catholic congregations provided spiritual and worldly comfort for white, old-stock settlers who arrived before the Civil War, African Americans who came as slaves and remained as free people, Germans, Czechs, and Norwegians who followed, and Hispanics who, in many cases, sought refuge from the Mexican Revolution. They all looked to cotton for subsistence and built churches to anchor their communities.

Much has changed since pioneer days. Cotton moved to the irrigated South Plains. Newcomers and weekenders, among them President George W. Bush, have built “hobby ranches” on the land. Waco has grown into an urban magnet with good jobs, decent schools, and a varied social life. Old folks died and young ones moved away, and, consequently, many of the open-country and small-town churches have closed. But nearly two dozen survive, and the intriguing question is, why?

Seeking the answer, Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless of Baylor University’s Institute for Oral History interviewed many of the remaining pastors and church members and derived four reasons: proud descendants of the founding families refuse to let go; the churches help sustain ethnic identities; members maintain a sense of place; and surviving churches have adapted. Long accustomed to semi-monthly worship services, some churches now rely on lay preachers. And although welcoming newcomers has been hard, it has paid off. President Bush worships at nearby Canaan Baptist Church and brings it national attention.

While the ninety-one interviews are available in Baylor’s oral history archives, Myers and Sharpless addressed their graceful narrative to a wider audience. Clark G. Baker, a Baylor professor of photojournalism, added sixty-five lovely black-and-white photographs. We do not learn how these open-country churches fit into the larger region, recently examined

*Rock Beneath the Sand: Country Churches in Texas.* Text by Lois E. Myers and Rebecca Sharpless. Photographs by Clark G. Baker. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003. xx + 197pp. Map, table, photographs, notes, bibliography, index. \$35.00.

On the southern apron of the Great Plains, in McLennan and surrounding counties in

in *Religion and Public Life in the Southern Crossroads* (2005), but they certainly remind us “of the state’s agricultural past” and the people’s “steadfast Christian faith.”

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