



## BICENTENNIAL MOMENT

**INTEMPERANCE & THE EVILS OF INTOXICATION** A major role of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Church was discipline of its members, such as disallowing girls to attend dancing parties. However, the most frequent problem for discipline at First Presbyterian, Murfreesboro, was intoxication. About September 1825 the Session issued its first citation for a member to appear to answer a complaint by "common fame" of intoxication. The member appeared and "acknowledged that he was sensible of being intoxicated . . . yet not so as to destroy his reason nor prevent him from attending to his necessary business, but. . . appeared to the wounding of the friends of Zion, . . . he would be more guarded. . . he was restored in the spirit of love and meekness to the full communion and fellowship of the Church." In October 1827 the Synod met in Murfreesboro and at this time a definite stand was taken against the evils of intemperance. The action taken at this meeting was said to have been the beginning of the first temperance society in Middle Tennessee. C. C. Henderson in his The Story of Murfreesboro states: ". . . a resolution was adopted that pledged the members to abstain from intoxicating liquors; that they would not permit their families to use them, except as medicine; that they would not provide them as articles of entertainment for their friends and that they would discountenance the use of them in the community." A study of the minutes of the Session indicates concern for the members and a need for discipline, frequently for intoxication. Some of the explanations are very interesting. When seven were accused at one session in December 1844, two explained that they had been overcome by hot toddy in the heat of the 1844 presidential campaign between Polk and Clay. On another occasion, the accused acknowledged his intoxication but stated that he had drunk to avoid a greater evil and did not admit to any sin in the matter. A militia man blamed his dereliction on the inclement weather while he was on parade and the Session accepted his explanation. One drinker admitted frequenting dram shops and regretted the reproach on the church and promised to abstain. He added that he believed his health required his drinking and if his health deteriorated, he would notify the Session before resuming his dram. John Wade, Sen., appeared before the session because he had been rumored of being intoxicated at an election at Sulphur Springs in March 1836. He explained he had a weakness or disability that seemed he was intoxicated when not. This satisfied the Session. One member was unwilling to abandon selling intoxicants and was debarred. The Session minutes list the members who were dismissed to other churches, were deceased, baptized, etc. but often there would be listed a suspension, the cause not given; more than likely the cause being unable to repent from intoxication. Perhaps, even more significant may have been the concern about business practices of members. There were several instances where the Session investigated charges of dishonest activities by members. These were much like court hearings. One of them lasted four days, involved a dozen witnesses, and resulted in an elder's dropping his charges against another elder and asking for a letter of withdrawal. While these actions may seem strange to us today, the tone of the account indicates a real concern for the individual and compassion for those who were willing to confess and strive to do better. [information researched by Susan Daniel & the late Ernest Hooper].