

Sharon's Tenacious Methodists

Some years before the turn of the 20th century there were only two families living in Sharon who professed Methodism--the Heltons and the Shufords. When these families (all of eleven people) wished to attend a Methodist service they had to travel eight or nine miles in a buggy to Old Prospect on Beaver Dam Road near Hopewell. (Prospect was forerunner of Hickory Grove's Mount Vernon.) Occasionally, when a preacher was available they were saved the travel and worshiped in an old store building where the Hill Building now stands.

Around 1894, potter M. A. Helton and R. S. Helton were joined by Ireland-born Edward Thomas (uncle of Carrie Love Cobb), in envisioning a Methodist church in Sharon. Uniting their faith with works, they purchased a lot from John L. Rainey for \$25, naming themselves as Trustees. At some kind of meeting with the leaders of Prospect, Mr. Edgar Latham recommended the lot be deeded over to the their congregation since "*there would never be a Methodist Church in Sharon.*" The three trustees fairly snorted at the suggestion, convinced of their vision and firm in their faith. Helton said he would continue to believe a church and parsonage would be built in Sharon--besides that, he said, "it wasn't costing anyone a cent to keep it."

Over the next couple of years the tiny band of believers worked and prayed to increase their numbers while they worshiped in the old Sharon Grammar School. For a while Marie Graves Farries was the pianist, followed by Helen Penninger Thompson with her father as choir director. The three trustees held the deed and their hopes for thirteen years before the first green blades of a Methodist church began to show in Sharon. In 1917 the congregation was organized into the Sharon Methodist Church with seventeen charter members: Mr. and Mrs. M. A. Helton, W. O Sherer, W. A. Thomas, Mrs. Lillian M. Ratchford, Mrs. Carrie Cobb, Mrs. Mary Good, M. M. Jones, Mrs. L. C. Street, Mrs. W. G. Hays, Miss Bessie Helton, Mr. and Mrs. O. M. Spurlin, Ruth Spurlin, Leroy Moore and Mr. and Mrs. K. L. Bankhead.

Though the congregation consisted mostly of blue-collar workers, several men went were merchants and many served the town as mayor and councilmen. Otis Spurlin served the town as clerk and treasurer from 1925-1927, and gained some notoriety in 1924 when he purchased the first radio in Sharon. Though not a charter member, W. G. Hayes was a successful furniture dealer and supplier of ice for the town, soon joined the church. When he was elected as Sharon's mayor in 1926 he was prepared to restore the strength of the Sabbath by closing down Sharon on Sundays "so tight there would be nothing to do but go to church." W. S. Gibson worked for Hill & Company, but later became the town's Postmaster. W. O. Sherer was a school teacher and another early member, John R. Cobb, was a successful and popular grocer and dry goods dealer. Charter member K. L. Bankhead was elected as town councilman.

Rev. H. C. Mouzon served the Sharon Methodist Church as its first pastor. Mouzon died while pasturing the congregation, and was succeeded by Rev. Elzia Myers. The first board of stewards was: M. A. Helton, J. R. Cobb, K. L. Bankhead and O. M. Spurlin. Two years after their organization, in 1919, the congregation began building a house of worship with many volunteers from neighborhood churches and the community. Nearly every man in the town contributed either materials, or labor--some contributed both. In spite of road conditions being worse than they had been in years, fifty-seven members of Mount Vernon and Shady Grove came to Sharon to assist putting a roof on the half-completed building. The women throughout the community

assisted the women of the church prepare hot, on-site meals for the workers. The church was truly built by Christian fellowship and cooperation. The building committee consisted of M. M. Jones, W. O Sherer, T. R. Penninger and O. M. Spurlin, Treasurer.

The same year that the Methodist Church was organized, (1917) and two years before they began building the church, Rev. W. T. Sims, the black pastor at St. John's Baptist Church was brutally murdered by a blood-thirsty band of black and white men. It was rumored that several white men were involved, two of which were identified as blacksmith, T. R. Penninger and his son, Fred. The younger Penninger was arrested but later was cleared of the charge. While the senior Penninger continued to be a suspect, a warrant was ever issued for his arrest. When the case came to court, only two black men were found guilty of the murder. None of the suspected white men were brought to trial.

Also concerning T. R. Penninger, it is interesting to note that a 1953 history of the church, lists Penninger as a member of the 1919 building committee--an important fact seems to have been forgotten. In the fall of 1918, while Penninger was serving the town as magistrate, he was shot down in cold blood his blacksmith shop, in front of Mary Whitesides, while reading a warrant to a suspect. It seems probable that the building committee had been formed a year or so before the actual construction began with Penninger as a member, but when the history was written his death was overlooked.

By the end of February 1921, the congregation, along with contractor R. W. Hope was bringing construction to an end. Although Rev. Whortan had estimated the total cost of the building would be about \$6,000, the actual cost was only \$3,600. Obviously, the cost fell far below the estimate because of donated materials and the volunteer labor. By the end of July work was nearly completed and the building committee scheduled painting for the week of August 2. To provide funds for the finishing touches the women of the church organized a box supper to the public at the school auditorium.

Except for the pews that were being made locally, the new Methodist Church was complete and many from the surrounding communities came to celebrate with the congregation on Sunday, 4 September. Borrowed benches and chairs filled the 250 seat capacity sanctuary, and these were filled by members and friends, leaving nearly fifty to stand. In attendance were the stewards of the church: M. M. Jones, M. A. Helton, O. M Spurlin and Walter Edwards along with the Trustees: W. O. Sherer, M. A. Helton and Walter Edwards.

Following a devotional by Rev. Wharton, Rev. George C. Leonard of Rock Hill delivered the day's message. He congratulated the congregation on their "enterprise and zeal" and prophesied a great future for the newest church. Special music was provided by two local quartets. J. Mason Wilkerson, Sam H. Wilkerson, W. B. Wilkerson and John Cobb, all from Hickory Grove comprised the first. The second was the "Sharon (A.R.P.) Church Quartet" consisting of W. A. Maloney, J. A. Maloney, Ed Maloney and Miss Iva Sherer.

In God's infinite wisdom, misfortune fell on the congregation during the early spring of 1923, in the form of a freak cyclone. The heavy winds blew the building off its pillars, damaging the structure beyond repair. In March the Building Committee placed a notice in the Yorkville

Enquirer for sealed bids for "tearing down and rebuilding the church" on 12 April. W. S. Gibson, the church treasurer, was employed by the Hill & Company at the time and any questions on specifications and bids could be placed with him.

Fortunately, the stewards had the foresight to take out an insurance policy against windstorms. The policy paid \$1,500. Rev. Whortan secured another thousand dollars from the Conference Board. Tom Kell of Hickory Grove submitted the lowest bid and construction on the Gothic Revival architecture featuring Gothic arched windows and an eye-catching jerkinhead gable on the front. A seasoned church-builder was sent to pastor the congregation during the building program--Rev. J. W. Lewis. Not only he lead the congregation spiritually, but also gave many hours of manual labor, driving nails, digging foundations and a multitude of other physical work.

By using material from the destroyed church, the new brick-veneered church was nearly finished by the middle of July, but the congregation was burdened with a debt of \$1,200. A protracted meeting was held in March 1925 in which the pastor, Rev. Lewis was assisted by Rev. R. L. Holroyd of Yorkville. The meeting must have inspired hearts as the debt was reduced by \$600.

Over the next few years the Ladies Missionary Society was responsible for liquidating by imaginative means. The dollar value of their money-raising efforts may seem trivial to the reader, but it must be remembered that these took place during the Great Depression, and too, few women were working outside the home. During 1930 the ladies divided themselves into money raising teams--Team #1 was led by Mrs. Spurlin while Mrs. J. S. Hope to the leadership of Team #2. The Spurlin team was thrilled with the \$57 they raised, but were topped by the Hope team that brought in \$105. The ladies had so much fun and pride in their work they initiated a competition called "Sunshine Bags" wherein the ladies were to place a penny in a bag for every day the sun shined. The total amount raised was \$26. Mrs. Gibson was awarded a prize of canned fruit for having the most in her bag--\$10.08. Near Thanksgiving the women held a bazaar and raised \$33 and \$45 by selling various pieces of needlework.

The debt was not fully liquated until the spring of 1933, and though it took years to become debt-free that did not dampen the rejoicing of the now sixty-member congregation. A jubilant celebration was held on Sunday, 2 April, led by Presiding Elder Reverend Wharton who preached from Matthew 16:18, "Upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of hell, shall not prevail against it." Rev. Wharton was assisted by Rev. Glenn Smith and the pastor, Rev. J. A. Chandler. Once again the "Sharon (A.R.P.) Church Quartet sang for the members and their quests. Following a collection Sam Wilkerson of Hickory Grove sang "The Holy City."

Until 1952 the Sharon Methodist Church was part of the Hickory Grove charge, but in the spring of 1953 the Sharon charge came into being. By then the congregation had grown to 137 members. The vibrant church built a handsome parsonage for approximately \$6,500. Today, like so many other rural churches, the Sharon congregation has dwindled to its former size and struggles to make its yearly budget. But these tenacious Methodists have seen hard times before.