



"The Clinton Independent"

CLINTON COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

1985

ICE STORM BRINGS BACK MEMORIES

The second ice storm of 1985 is in progress as I write this overdue epistle.

The crackling of ice that has already formed on the spruce trees near our home reminds me of another storm many years ago while I was teaching at the Fairview School in E. Essex Township. The freezing ran had begun on Sunday and I relied on my dad to get me to my first rural school Monday morning. At \$35 a month I had not accumulated much; but boy, was I glad to have that job.

Back to the ice storm - there was about a 3/4 inch thick covering of ice on everything but as I remember - no snow. We got along fairly well with the old Essex. My dad was a pretty careful driver. About half way between Plank Hill and the little brick school the road crosses a small stream and an iron-railed bridge spanned the creek at the bottom of the gully. We broke over the north crest near the cemetery and headed south down hill. When we were about half-way down the road all of a sudden the back wheels jumped the tracks and that old Essex appeared to be headed for an unscheduled side trip to the ditch. Well, dad, like an old sea captain, maneuvered and sashayed that car around and then he "gave it the gas." We shot across that bridge and up the hill in front of Isaac Wood's with enough momentum to have carried us into the next township. He looked at me, grinned, and calmly said, "We made it."

That ice hung on for a week. I had engaged Lawrence Ward, brother-in-law of Helen Post, to speak to the pupils about Michigan bird life. He came with his collection of bird eggs and nests. As I recall, he did a noble presentation and I thought it only gentlemanly to help him get his collection to his car. The school was on a slight knoll and his car, a model-A Ford, was on the crest of the knoll. I reached over to open the door for him when I noticed he was struggling to stay upright. You never saw such gymnastics as Lawrence performed for the next few seconds, balancing that crate of eggs and nests, but he made it. (continued last page)



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GENEALOGY

ST. JOHNS FIRST METHODIST CHURCH

A History by Max Field

Dec. 24, 1984 marked the Pan-Methodist Bicentennial - 200 years of Methodist Church in the U. S.

Methodism was spread by circuit riding preachers. Clinton County was no exception. St. Johns Methodist Church was formed from the Duplain/Mapleton Circuit which included nearly all of Clinton County in 1855. Two pastors, Rev. Harder and Rev. T. J. Hill traveled 300 miles each month preaching at various places in the county.

The St. Johns group consisted of nine people with Ethan Allen, a grandson of the hero of Ticonderoga, as leader. For eight years the group grew, meeting at various locations in the city.

In 1863 they secured land at the head of Spring Street and on Jan. 14, 1864 they dedicated their first church. The gleaming white frame building had a tall steeple and was located just east of the present church, facing north down Spring Street.

Eloise Hambleton's grandmother (Miranda Newman) was one of the early members. Her husband, Timothy, was not a member, but must have been sympathetic to the struggle to build a church. He took his team of oxen, dubbed "White mice" (because they were so small) into the virgin timber just south of where the courthouse now stands. He cut and dragged out the heavy timbers which served as the foundation.

A little stream flowed from west to northwest past the corner of the block on which the church was built. A log bridge crossed the stream from the church corner to the courthouse square. Local businessmen donated a bell for the steeple which summoned people to church and also slowly tolled the years of a persons' age at their funeral; or loudly called for aid when a fire threatened someone in the town.

On the January morning of the dedication the snow lay deep enough to cover the rail fence around the court house. A bob-sleigh drawn by farm horses, with bells jingling on their harness, broke the road through with the first load of folks.

The white church in the woods served for 39 years. In 1893 agitation for a larger church began. The woods were gone. The congregation, like the city, had grown. Plans were made for a church "not for the present only but for a century." Work began in the spring of 1895 with the cornerstone laid on May 25. The building was an imposing structure built of red brick with high gables, stained glass windows and it nearly filled the lot. Total cost for church and furnishings was \$19,500 and \$14,000 was pledged to pay for it when it was dedicated Oct. 17, 1895.

GAZETTE

The children of Eliza Ann Huston Hicks gave the church its tower bells. They were cast by the McShane Bell Foundry in Baltimore. The 11 bells weigh 11,600 pounds. The tower of the brick church was modified when the bells were installed in 1916.

On Saturday morning, Oct. 10, 1936, R. G. Becher was on Main Street delivering ice for Schoenholtz & Pardee. The beer gardens were his first customers...he had keys to their establishments. He was just starting work when the fire whistle blew. A volunteer fireman, he ran the block to the firehall. Dispatch told him it was the Methodist Episcopal Church on the corner of State and Linden Streets. Since he was the first man to arrive at the firehall, R.G. took the smallest piece of equipment and started out.

The church building faced west, overlooking the Courthouse Square. A tall tower on the northwest corner housed the bells. RG pulled up to the back of the church and placed his hand flat against the wooden door. It was so hot he couldn't keep his hand there. The firemen call that a "hot fire." He pulled his rig away from the building to make way for the bigger equipment. About 15 firemen fought the blaze for 2 hours before they agreed it would be a total loss and concentrated on saving the bells. From its headway by the time it was discovered, firemen believed it started the evening before and smoldered all night. The brick and slate construction kept out enough oxygen to prevent a blazing fire.

The bells were saved when firemen ran streams of water down the tower and over the bells to keep them cool. As the roof timbers burned the slate roof crashed into the basement. But the bell tower remained intact.

At noon, when the fire had scarcely died down, Stuart Tupper, the regular chimer, climbed the tower and ringing the chimes by hand, played the hymn "Faith of Our Fathers." People in the streets stopped and listened in silence, with tears in their eyes.

The church suffered a stunning loss. Records were destroyed.

The bells were later installed in the present United Methodist Church tower where they are heard every day.

Seventeen months would pass before the congregation could worship in their own church again. Chancey Shafley (Hazel Halsey's uncle) directed the clean up. August Brandt had ordered a new tractor and it was housed in the parsonage garage for the work. The new church would stand further back from the sidewalk. Many problems faced the building committee. Available space was limited. It was difficult to predict how the membership and city would grow. Some were convinced the city was as big as it would ever get. The threat of World War II made labor and materials scarce. Only 3 contractors submitted bids, all higher than expected.

After many revisions the contract was signed in August 1937 and the cornerstone was laid Oct. 12 of that year. In March 1938 400 people worshipped in the new basement; and in June 1938 the completed church was dedicated. (By Max Field)

PRESIDENT'S RAP continued...

So much for the ice storm. My drive is cleaned. I'm ready for another adventure.

But first...Bill Carter, our last month's speaker, gave an excellent talk on hand tools. He will come back later and talk on Nepal where his son is stationed with the Peace Corps.

I visited the Vaughn Seed Company at Ovid a while back when the water was waist high but the frogs weren't out yet. They have promised to give us a program in the fall. (Ed. note: The seed folks, not the frogs.)

I urge you to attend our April 18 meeting. David Finney has developed a fine Civil War program. A historian from N. Farmington, he will take us back 120 years to relive those awesome days.

Ford Ceasar



Civil War Program
April 18
See "events" item
in next column

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

CCHS April 18 DeWitt High School Auditorium, 7:30 p.m. program: "THE CIVIL WAR" by David Finney & His Living History Program

PGS Reopened for the summer...
Hours:
Sundays 1-5 p.m.
Wednesdays 2-8 p.m.

GENEALOGY DIVISION:

No program information received at press-time

LIGHTHOUSE SOCIETY

The United States Lighthouse Society, a nonprofit historical and educational organization, has been incorporated to restore and preserve America's lighthouses. For more information, contact the society at 130 South Elmo Way, San Francisco, CA 94127.

**Clinton County
Historical Society**

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