

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Poland United Methodist Church

Parishioner Experience

O. H. 566

LEONA SIMPKINS

Interviewed

by

Paul Rohrbaugh

on

July 12, 1981

LEONA SIMPKINS

Mrs. Leona Simpkins was born on August 26, 1928 to Leon and Mable Miller in Poland, Ohio. She was raised in Poland and graduated from Poland High School. She was raised next door to the old church and has been closely associated with it for all of her life. She was married to Donald Simpkins in 1954 and has two children: John and Kathleen, the daughter residing at home. She worked for Kenny Barnes and Henry McCrone to the present.

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INTERVIEWEE: LEONA SIMPKINS

INTERVIEWER: Paul Rohrbaugh

SUBJECT: Church fire, Reconstruction, Church involvement

DATE: July 12, 1981

R: This is an oral history interview with Mrs. Leona Simpkins at 7249 North Lima Road on the 12th day of July, 1981, on the Poland United Methodist Church History Project held in conjunction with Dr. Viehmeyer. The interviewer is Paul Rohrbaugh.

Well, Mrs. Simpkins, perhaps if we can begin maybe you can tell us a little bit about yourself.

S: Well, I was born in Poland, right next door to the Methodist church.

R: Oh really!

S: I was born and reared in that house. I lived there until I was married in 1954. I happened to be born on a Sunday. My mother had attended church before I came along in the evening. At that time they had what they call cradle roll members. If you attended the church until you were a youth and able to join you were listed on the cradle roll. I was a cradle roll member.

R: Your birthplace, is that next to the old or new church?

S: The old church on Main Street. I've never knew another church. We did attend a short time in New Middletown when we moved to New Middletown. I was in about the middle of second grade and we moved back to Poland in the middle of third grade and on occasion we attended a church in New Middletown because it was so far to come back to Poland.

R: Where did you go to school at?

- S: Poland Union School is where I started. I went there until junior high; that was at College Street. I graduated from the high school on College Street.
- R: The cradle roll, do you recall any other people that were on that?
- S: Probably all of my sisters and brothers. My mother may have even been a cradle roll member.
- R: How extensive were your feelings involved with the church?
- S: Very. My grandmother, Martha Moseley, was first active in the Methodist church. Her children, one being my mother, Mable Miller, are all active in the church and all of my immediate family. My children are both members of Poland Methodist Church. My husband joined after we were married because before he had gone to a Presbyterian church.
- R: The decision to join the church is done when you're a young adult?
- S: Yes. At the time I joined it was at age thirteen. We had confirmation classes that we attended. I think it was six months that we attended them every Sunday.
- R: Do you recall anything about your confirmation or why you decided to go into the church?
- S: No particular reason other than Poland Methodist Church is home. It just grew on me. There was something about it that if you didn't go you thought you missed something on Sunday morning.
- R: What is your Sunday like?
- S: I get up Sunday morning and have breakfast and go to church. I very rarely miss a Sunday. We always get there early so we can talk to the people first.
- R: How early is early?
- S: Church service starts at 11:45 and we're usually there by 10:00. In the past years I have been involved with Sunday school which would be at 9:30. I taught Sunday school for seventeen years.
- R: What grades?
- S: I started in second grade and I graduated right along with my son to fourth grade. As he progressed I moved along to the next class and taught in there. Johnny was born February 16, 1956 and our church burned April 1, 1957. Mother still lived next door to the church and I lived a couple of blocks up the

street. The first thing she did was call all excited that our church was burning. I grabbed my baby and ran down the street and stood on the porch and watched the church burn. He, just being a year old, associated church with fire. It was very upsetting to him. Every time we tried to go into that building--the main part of the church burned, but we still had the educational unit and we did hold church services there for sometime after--he would cry and scream, "Fire, hot, burn!" This is really how I got involved in Sunday school class. I started in the class that he was in, so It wasn't second grade it was two-year-olds.

When we built our new church and after it was under roof there was a lot of work that the congregation did on the interior themselves. We would take Johnny with us every night. The women served coffee and cake or something and the men did a lot of the labor work. The women did a lot of the cleaning. We took Johnny with us every night until he didn't associate church with fire anymore.

- R: There are very few eyewitnesses to the church actually burning that I've come across. What was it like back then?
- S: It was about 4:00 in the afternoon. It was a horrible feeling in the pit of your stomach. With my mother living right next door there were a lot of people congregating in our yard. Just to stand there and watch beautiful stained glass windows popping, it was a devastating feeling. It was something that you knew and loved and felt at home in.
- R: How long was it on fire for?
- S: I think I must have got there about 4:10 and it was after 6:00 before the real blaze was under control.
- R: What did you feel like when you saw the church burn?
- S: It was so unbelievable. I couldn't believe all that beautiful stone and everything was burning.
- R: Did you think there would be another church at the time?
- S: Yes. I didn't realize at that particular time that we would have to find another site. I just expected that we could rebuild on that.
- R: Why didn't they rebuild the old one?
- S: It had to do with the conference mainly. In order to build the size structure we needed--our congregation was enlarging--we had to have so much space; there wasn't quite enough land there. To buy land on either side of it was just too expensive. We had that land given to us.

- R: Do you know who had given that land to the church?
- S: Ernie and Mary Withers.
- R: Why wasn't this the end for the church when it burned?
- S: The church isn't like a business organization. It's like a family clinging together, working together.
- R: You mentioned about the congregation working together to build the new church. Do you remember the people involved in that?
- S: Ernie and Mary Withers, Leon Miller, Don Simpkins, Guy Chambers, Paul Reineth, Clayton Williams, Harry Kerr, and Reverend Dean Marston.
- R: When did they work on this? I assume they all had jobs.
- S: Every evening after dinner we would usually arrive there about 6:30 or 7:00 and work until 9:00 or 10:00. That was on the structure. We also had to work in a lot of pie baking, a lot of dinners. We had a tent at the Canfield Fair.
- After our new church was under roof enough they put the stoves in the kitchen and they had some stoves in the basement and they cooked all this food and prepared it at the church and transported it to the fairgrounds. The ladies went in and started at 2:00 in the morning and baked pies; they would bake about 1,000 pies all at one time. Then the meat cook would come in about 6:00 and start cooking meat. That would go on most of the day. We had another crew come in to prepare vegetables. It was a 24-hour day job for about seven days a week each year.
- R: Who were the people that organized all that? Who ran the show, so to speak?
- S: The ladies started baking pies and selling them. It just kind of boomeranged from that. I think it was the trustees at the time that got the fair project rolling. It was very hard work, but rewarding. You would get so tired and get very silly. It was a lot of fun. By the seventh day when the fair ended everybody was a little slaphappy. All that stuff had to be taken down and brought back to the church and cleaned and put away for the next year. It really was a little more than just seven days. It was seven days you were at the fair, but there was preparation before and after.
- R: Do you remember any days in particular that were slaphappy?
- S: We would play tricks. I did a lot of work at the church in the preparing of food. We would make coleslaw and put it

in cartons and send it out. Every once in a while we would fill a carton with something other than coleslaw, and when they opened it up it wouldn't be coleslaw. We would play a trick on them at the fairgrounds on occasion.

R: How many years did this go on?

S: I think twelve years. We built that building from start to finish. We had paid it off in fifteen years. We put a lot of hours in, projects, making money to pay it off that fast.

R: What did you do between the time the old structure was closed down and the new structure wasn't ready yet?

S: The old structure, before we sold it, we used it for the church. We used the educational wings and we had our church meetings there. After we sold that we had to get out and we went to North Elementary School to have our church services.

The pie bakers and so on, we used the old kitchen in the basement of the church. We had a lot of dinners. There were strawberry festivals and so on; the youth of the church would go out and pick strawberries. We involved everybody; it wasn't just the older members or the middle-aged. If you could stand up you got involved.

R: What has been the most memorable time for you?

S: Probably during the disaster of the fire. The fellowship was there. There was always somebody to associate with. We've always had a very active youth group, which I was a member of. At that time it was called the Epepth League. At the time when I joined the church it was called the Episcopal Methodist. With the conference there have been a few changes in the name along the years.

I always went to Sunday school; that is how I got to teaching. They do have some very good Sunday school classes for all ages.

R: What do you do in Sunday school for all ages?

S: Your Sunday school classes are mainly a Bible study every morning. They all have different social events. The ladies have a bowling league on Thursdays. They had a mixed doubles on Friday night. We have baseball teams, basketball. It's not all sitting there studying the Bible; it's a lot of social. My social life has been very much associated with the church. There is always something to keep you interested other than just going to church and sitting there.

R: What has the church offered to you personally over the years and has that changed any?

S: There isn't much change. It is just a very good fellowship of knowing people and mingling with people. If you need something they are there to help.

As an example, my father passed away sixteen years ago, and it happened to be during fair time. We were all at the church working hard and cooking. The people took their time and came to the funeral and as soon as the funeral was over we all went back to the church and they had prepared dinner for 70 people. We sat down and ate our dinner and cleaned up everything. They worked all this in along with all their other activities for the day. This is just the type of people we associate with at our church; they bend over to help one another.

R: What do you feel you have given the church over the years, and has that changed?

S: I hoped I have helped a few people along the way. When I was teaching Sunday school in the church a mother just up and left one day; she left two small boys. I had the older one of the two boys in my Sunday school class. The younger one must have been about two, two and a half. The grandmother always brought the boys into Sunday school. The younger one would stand outside my door and cry because the older one was in the Sunday school class. He didn't want to be left alone in the class that he belonged in. I would open the door and bring him in and sit there and hold him on my lap. He must have been about eighteen when I ran into him in the drugstore one day. He came up to me and patted me on the shoulder and said, "You're the lady who used to hold me when I cried." I never thought he would remember it. It left an impression on him.

R: I understand that the ministers of the church change rather frequently?

S: It seems to be about six years and then they move them on.

R: How many do you remember?

S: Reverend Clark baptized me; I don't really remember him. Then there was Reverend Bryenton; he is the first one I can really remember. There was Reverend Weldele, Reverend Cornell, Reverend Reilly, Reverend Hess, Reverend Parr, who married us and baptized our first child. There was Reverend Marston, Reverend Hubler, Reverend Santomen.

R: Who was the minister during the fire?

S: Marston. He was still here when we dedicated the new one. Reverend Uphoff was another minister that we had. There was Glen Lockard. A lot of them have moved into higher positions since leaving our church.

R: Do any of those stand out in your mind?

S: Reverend Cornell had children my age and we got acquainted through that. Reverend Bryenton would always stop at the well on my grandmother's property when he came down the street to get a drink. I can remember John Hess with an apron on grinding cabbage for the fair. All of our ministers have been very personable. They mingled well and there was a lot of fun involved.

R: At the 150th anniversary coming up do you think there will be another anniversary like the 200th and that the church will be as important in the years to come as it has been during the past years?

S: Yes. I attended the 100th anniversary of the church; I was only six years old at the time.

R: Why do you think the church will continue to prosper?

S: People, there is a need in all of us. You realize in time that there is a need that can be fulfilled by going to church.

R: Is there anything you would like to add?

S: One thing there we didn't mention was the bell that is in our new church. It came from our old church. That was one thing that we saved. We saved a stained glass window and the bell. They are both in the new church.

R: Did they have any sort of ceremonies when those were installed?

S: There was quite a congregation of people for the bell, but it wasn't a ceremony. They lifted it up with a crane to set it up. As a little girl next door to the church I used to get to run over and ring it on Sunday morning. I wasn't officially the bell ringer, but it was something that I liked to do.

R: How did you ring the bell? Was it an electrical operation?

S: No, it still is pulled by a rope. After the first pull it moves very easily.

Another thing we did was make apple butter. We would build a fire in the parking lot of the church and have a fire under the kettles and stay there all day. We were quite a bunch of cooks. With all the people working together I feel it built a strong church.

R: Thank you.