

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Poland United Methodist Church

Parishioner Experience

O. H. 797

BENJAMIN BILLINGS

Interviewed

by

Paul Rohrbaugh

on

August 16, 1981

BENJAMIN BILLINGS

Mr. Benjamin Billings was born on April 2, 1913 to Clyde and Sara Billings in Youngstown, Ohio. He attended and graduated from Poland High School. Mr. Billings worked for a time at the steel factories for a firm furnishing hydraulic parts for the various mills. However, after nine to ten years he decided to go into business himself opening a floor covering establishment in Poland with his wife. He was married to his wife Edith and they had two children, Donald and Carol, both married and with their own families. Although retired, Mr. Billings along with his wife operate an antique and clock store in Poland, both of which have been a hobby of his for several years. Mr. Billings became a member of the Poland United Methodist Church following his marriage and birth of their first child.

Paul Rohrbaugh

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INTERVIEWEE: BENJAMIN BILLINGS
INTERVIEWER: Paul Rohrbaugh
SUBJECT: Church history, personal involvement, pastors,
church fire and reconstruction
DATE: August 16, 1981

R: This is an interview with Mr. Benjamin Billings at his home, 7496 Pittsburgh Road in Poland, on August 16, 1981. This is for the Poland United Methodist Church History project in conjunction with the Oral History Program and Dr. Veemeyer and the interviewer is Paul Rohrbaugh.

Okay Mr. Billings, perhaps we could start off if you could tell us a little bit about yourself?

B: What do you want to know?

R: Your age, where you were born.

B: All right. I was born in Youngstown in 1913, April 2, and lived in Youngstown; I went to school at Princeton until 1928 when we moved to Poland; I went to high school in Poland. That was the Depression, of course, so I started out working at Isaly's at 35¢ an hour.

R: Isaly's downtown?

B: I worked in the shop downtown. The store's no longer there. The interesting part I think of it now is that I had worked myself up to night manager. In other words, from midnight until 6:00 in the morning I had the store all to myself. You can imagine, front door open and didn't worry about anything. Well, about two and a half to three years later I got a job then with the Hydro Company. I worked there for, not quite ten years, and I decided that I wanted out of that type of business. So I fixed floor coverings. I got a job at Hume's

Furniture downtown. I worked there for about eight years. And then we decided that we would open up a floor covering store of our own. We got this little shop in Poland, and we were very successful. But we never got big. I had hoped at one time that maybe my son would be interested in it, but he wasn't. When he left college he never came home. He ended up in Denver. So we kept the business. We had one employee for twenty-seven years. And so we closed that up.

Of course, from there I went into the antique business. The antique business wasn't new to us, though, because we had done shows and had done it as a hobby since early 1960. So that's about it.

R: How did you become a member of the Poland United Methodist Church?

B: I married a Methodist.

R: You married a Methodist?

B: Yes. I was raised a Presbyterian, belonged to Evergreen Presbyterian. My grandfather was not a charter member but started with it almost at the very beginning and was one of the founders of the church.

R: What was his first name?

B: Adam Johnson. I was a member of that until I got married. And I was still a member for about two years after, because I don't think I joined the Poland Methodist Church until after our son was born. He was born two years after we were married. At that time Sherman Press was minister at Evergreen Presbyterian. He advised me that we should decide which church we wanted to go to and join that one. So, I made the decision that since we lived in Poland we would go to the Poland Methodist Church. Of course, my wife was already a member and her mother was. So I thought I would come to join the Poland Methodist.

R: What did you have to go through to join the church?

B: Just a pastoral letter.

R: Who wrote the letter?

B: I believe at that time all I had to do I can't tell you exactly whether I requested that they send it or whether the church contacted Evergreen and asked for the letter.

R: That's quite different.

B: Yes, there was no reaffirming of faith, just transferred the letter.

R: What did you feel like when you first went to the church as a member?

B: I didn't find much different between the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist as far as I was concerned. It was just friendly, family-type church. They were both, I imagine, about the same size churches and the same class of people as far as income. Well, of course, I knew a lot of the people being that I had gone to high school out here. It just was no change.

R: So really, you didn't have much of a problem fitting in.

B: Not a bit.

R: Did you participate in any organizations?

B: Do you mean in the church?

R: In the church, right.

B: No, not really. That has always more or less been my doings. I mean, I've shied away from holding office. I did organize a class. Well, it was a Sunday school class for young married couples. And, of course, it got a lot of backing from the minister and we found it very enjoyable and successful.

R: How many people were in that?

B: I think, originally, about eight to ten couples.

R: Do any of the people stand out in your memory? Do you remember any of their names?

B: There was Jim and Ethyl Field, who happened to be my brother-in-law and sister-in-law; Wilson's, Arnold Wilson, who was a neighbor and who taught the class; Moore, and her husband was in the service. This was in 1943, so a lot of them were in the service. So instead of it being the married couples, we were outnumbered because we had more wives than we had husbands. There was a couple named Goodwin. They no longer live in Poland. They moved several years ago. He was transferred. But that was more or less the organizers of it. Then after that there was Neal Schaffer and his wife, and Harold Withers and Lucille. And a lot of them are all members of the church right now and active in the church.

R: How long did that club class exist?

B: I would say until we became middle-aged. I don't know how long exactly. I would say it must have been around twelve years or so.

R: Do you remember any of the ministers?

B: Oh yes. The ones who impressed you are the ones that you think of, of course. Being a Presbyterian, we had a minister and we kept him. Now that's the only thing I'm not too sure I still approve of in the Methodist Church. You could have a minister two years or four years. That seemed to be the limit. So perhaps you got acquainted with them, maybe you didn't.

R: Were there any that you wish they didn't take away?

B: I liked Dr. Riley really well. I remember Reverend Uplaw, but he was an evangelist-type minister I would say. He was very impressive and he was very active with the young people, especially the teenagers, wonderful Boy Scout. And, of course, that was right after the war and he had been in the service. Reverend Marston was probably there the longest. Probably I had the most contact with the three of them. Of course, Marston was there during the building of the new church after the old church burned down. I was lucky enough to have the contract for all of the floors in the church outside of the carpet. Well naturally, when you come close--not that you work with the minister--but at least you were there every day and you would get to know them that way.

R: Let's talk, maybe, a little bit about the building that you built. When did you first find out about the old church's destruction?

B: Having a business in Poland, we were in Poland when the fire started.

R: What time of day did the church burn down?

B: I can't tell you the hour, but I imagine around noon. It was in the daytime anyway.

R: From what I hear, it pretty well tied up the whole day as far as traffic. The town was almost like in a chaos. What was it like?

B: We had a new addition on the back and that wasn't damaged. It was in the sanctuary. And, of course, we had an interest in the old sanctuary. It had been remodeled just a few years

B: before and it was very pretty in there. It had your stained glass windows. They had changed the sanctuary around so that you actually got the sun shining through on Sunday morning. And where the sanctuary is laid out, it made it very attractive. It just felt like something personal. And it was personal. It belonged to you and it was destroyed.

R: What did you think of the future of the church just right then?

B: Oh, there was no doubt that we would rebuild.

R: Oh really?

B: Oh yes.

R: Did you feel bad when they didn't rebuild the old structure but went ahead and built a new one?

B: No, I like the new church very much. I like the style of it. The old church, of course, you go back I imagine to the first of the century and there's quite a few churches around of that style. No, personally, I like the style of our church now. It has more appeal to me. It has more reverence, I think, in our sanctuary now than in the other type.

R: Why is that?

B: Oh, I don't know; it's just my own personal. . . Our sanctuary now is used only for worship. On the other, it was small and you had your Sunday school, you had classes in the sanctuary because there was no place else to hold them. You had entertainment in the sanctuary. When I say entertainment, I mean children's programs, which you should have, but I like to see them held in another part of the church.

R: As a worshipper?

B: Yes.

R: Who was the minister when that happened, when the church burned down?

B: I believe Marston was there. No, I'm sure he was there.

R: Did attendance drop off or maintain during the period when they didn't have a regular church?

B: Oh no, I think they were maintained. In fact, I don't know about the attendance, but it should be something that brings you together.

- R: Oh really, is that what you felt?
- B: Everybody got behind it and everybody had a job and they worked at it.
- R: Oh, is that you how you did it? You had the floors? You were putting the floors in?
- B: Now the floors, when they built the church, the new one, it was built and we used that sanctuary just in the raw, so to speak, no plaster. We had folding chairs and all they had was like cheesecloth on the windows. There was no hall or anything at that time. We were two or three years with it like that.
- R: How did they pay for all this? Did you work in any way to help pay for all this? How was the balance paid?
- B: Through pledges and through the Canfield Fair and the women baking pies. And it's too bad they don't still because they were out of this world.
- R: Do you remember any of the people who did all that, who were involved in that when they started that?
- B: Do you mean in the whole thing?
- R: Yes, baking pies too.
- B: Baking pies, that was the Women's Society and that was Mrs. Mulligan, Mrs. McKawley, Mrs. Wilson, and Mrs. Miller.
- R: Did you work at the Canfield Fair?
- B: I only worked out there once.
- R: What was that like?
- B: I got assigned to washing dishes. And if you ever washed dishes that much, I mean, for days after I could taste the dishwater.
- R: How long of a day did you put in out there?
- B: The fair was opened probably about sixteen hours, from morning until night. They had it set up, I believe, to also take care of the people working at the fair before it was opened. So it opened early. So if you would just divide that. . . I don't know whether we had two or three shifts. You would work one shift.
- R: Was it fun or hard work?

- B: It was fun to begin with, but it got to be work.
- R: The other big thing I did would be participating in the 100th anniversary in 1974.
- B: No, that was before.
- R: A little bit before then?
- B: Yes. In fact, that's about four years before I joined. At that time I was not a member, but I was going to the Poland Presbyterian Church, especially Sunday school.
- R: The dedication of the church was finally completed. Do you remember that?
- B: Yes. Now, not in detail.
- R: Didn't they raise the bell or something like that? They put the tower together or something like that? Or is that something different that I'm thinking of?
- B: They raised the bell from the old church.
- R: Oh, from the old church?
- B: Yes, that's one thing they did salvage.
- R: Is there anything else from the old church? Your wife named a couple of things.
- B: The window in the chapel, which is a round, circular window which faces the west, it is beautiful. Then there's also a light that was in the old church as a memorial that had been the landing going from the main floor to the chapel, a vigil light.
- R: You mentioned that everybody kind of pulled together. Do you think that would happen today?
- B: Oh, I think so.
- R: What makes you feel that?
- B: Knowing the people in the church. I mean, if there's something to be done, they'll do it when it needs to be done.
- R: Is the church the same one that you first joined when you had just gotten married, like in 1938?
- B: How do you mean?
- R: People-wise, spirit-wise. How has it changed in the forty-

three years that you have been in it?

B: Oh, this parish has changed for the better, much better.

R: What makes it better?

B: Well again, going back to when I said I liked the sanctuary for worshipping only, this is what they do. This appeals to me. We have a certain ritual that I know some people don't like, but it appeals to me. I think it shows for reverence in the church.

R: Is there anything else that makes it better?

B: There's one other thing that I never remember in the church until the last few years: They have started reading the scripture. There is a Bible in every pew for every human, and you follow along with the minister when he is reading it. This is new to me and I like it.

I don't always do it; I listen to him read. But, to me, one of the amazing things is the young adults. In fact, it kind of makes me ashamed when I don't follow myself.

R: Do you think the Poland Church is going to have a 200th anniversary?

B: Oh, I'm sure of that.

R: Why?

B: Because the church and because of the location, that is, Poland.

R: As far as what, physical location or. . .

B: Well, because of the people.

R: What makes those people different from another church?

B: I think the people of Poland are interested in a church, and they are willing to do what has to be done to it.

R: I want to thank you for taking time out on a Sunday afternoon and chatting with us.

END OF INTERVIEW