

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Poland Methodist Church 150th Anniversary

Personal Experience

O.H. 1023

ROBERT O. LEWIS

Interviewed

by

Wilfredo Rivera

on

May 5, 1981

ROBERT O. LEWIS

Robert O. Lewis was born on March 28, in Sharon, Pennsylvania. He is the son of Edward and Grace Lewis. The Lewis family moved to Poland, Ohio when Robert was very young, but relocated to Youngstown. Robert attended school within the Youngstown system, and graduated from South High School in 1934. He proceeded to further his education by attending Youngstown College, and received his degree in 1940.

Presently, Mr. Lewis is retired, after a successful career in excavating and land development. He attends Poland's United Methodist Church, and has been instrumental in the various programs within it. He enjoys stamp collecting, and is very active with his home.

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INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT O. LEWIS  
INTERVIEWER: Wilfredo Rivera  
SUBJECT: Relocation, ethnicity, congregation, values,  
crisis, events, future endeavors  
DATE: May 5, 1981

R: This is an interview with Mr. Robert Lewis for the Youngstown State University 150th Anniversary of Poland United Methodist Church by Wilfredo Rivera at 2994 Red Maple Lane in Poland, Ohio on May 5, 1981 at approximately 1:00 p.m.

Mr. Lewis, can you tell me where your father and your mother were born and some of the stories you recall of you family's past?

L: Well, my father and mother were born in Sharon, Pennsylvania. I was born in Sharon, Pennsylvania and lived there exactly one month to the day. March 28, 1916, I was born; April 16th of the same year, we moved to Youngstown.

R: What type of work did your parents do?

L: My dad was a steel mill worker. He worked for Republic Steel Corporation.

R: And your mother?

L: Mother was a housewife.

R: Were your parents able to attend school?

L: No, I think my dad's education was limited to fourth grade. My mother's education . . . I think she graduated from high school. I think she took a little bit of a business administration course before she got married.

R: Which value did your parents stress the most? Hard work, religion, education, or career?

L: My dad's emphasis probably was on hard work and honest, good living. He believed in the fact that his work was his bond. If my dad said anything, you'd better believe he believed it, and he would back it up.

R: When did your parents come to Poland, Ohio?

L: My parents never came to Poland, Ohio. They lived in Youngstown all their lives. We moved to Poland in 1948--that's my wife and I.

R: Why did you come to Poland?

L: We liked the atmosphere of Poland--the country village style of living. We lived just far enough out to be out in the country, and just close enough in to be into the city. We found an ideal spot of about twenty acres, bought it, settled, and lived very well since that time.

R: During this time, what was your occupation?

L: Well, I was primarily, during that time, an excavating contractor, land developer, house builder, and commercial building builder.

R: Was your wife involved in some type of work?

L: No, she was a housewife all of the time. She had her hands full with three kids.

R: Of what religious background were your parents?

L: My parents were probably Presbyterian, but during my early youth, I went to the Third Reform Church in Brownlee Woods. I think that was because of the fact that they had a Boy Scout troop there. But, I actually was baptized a Presbyterian. I believe we were members of the Presbyterian Church until we transferred to the Third Reform Church.

R: Why did you turn over to become a Methodist?

L: When we moved to Poland, we pick a church, probably from convenience than anything else. At that time, the Methodist Church had a terrific Sunday School class. Reverend Norman Parr taught the Sunday School class. A lot of the younger people that, at that time, we were running around with, belonged to that Sunday School class. They recommended that we come as visitors. We came as visitors and were very impressed with the class. We joined the Sunday School class and the church too.

R: Did you stress religion in your family?

L: Yes, we've had a closely knit family. We're a very loving family. We're a very close family, and religion was a good part of that. What church did you attend at that particular time?

L: The Methodist Church.

R: Where was it located?

L: It was located on Youngstown-Poland Road, almost in the center of Poland.

R: Can you describe the style of building this church was?

L: It was a very impressive structure with stained-glass windows. [It was] quaint, and very much a part of the village atmosphere, with a newer, more modern Christian Education Department on the back end of it. The front of the church had a stone type of appearance although it was actually made from paving brick. They had weathered with age to the point that they looked gray. They had all of the appearance of a stone structure. It had a nice, impressive set of steps going up to the front of the church, going into the sanctuary. [It was] just a nice, homey-feeling church.

R: Who was the leader or the minister of the church at this specific time?

L: When we joined the church, Reverend Norman Parr was the minister.

R: Who succeeded him?

L: I think that right after Norman Parr, Dean Marston was the minister.

R: Can you tell me your involvement with the church at that specific time?

L: Well, I was not especially active. I served on the board and at one time or another, I was chairman of the Nominating committee, and I was a steward. I just ran the usual serving capacity in a limited manner. I attended board meetings, and made my votes, but I was not especially active.

R: During the fire or the burning of the church, how would you say the people reacted at that specific time?

L: Fire, of course, threw consternation into everybody's mind. The church was a landmark in the village. I think there were a lot of tears shed because of it. I think there was a lot of sorrow. I think it was a part of a lot of people's lives. In general, just think that it was a very upsetting time in the religious life of everybody. It also brought to attention a study that had been undertaken about six months before that. I headed the committee that did the investigating. We were totally surrounded by commercial property. Any anticipated expansion would be very, very costly, and very difficult to procure. The church realized that fact six months before and had delegated a group of us to investigate whether it was at all feasible to think of expanding, or whether we should consider relocating.

Of course, what started out as a kind of a leisure study, now became a crisis, because the church had burned. We had no roof over our heads, and an immediate decision had to be made as to whether we were going to rebuild the old church and be back in the same predicament that we were before on expansion, or whether we should take the step of relocating at that minute. Fortunately, we had done enough work in that study to be sure in our minds that the best route for the church to go was to relocate.

R: Did the people react by saying they wanted to relocate, or did they want to rebuild the church?

L: Well, there was a tremendous amount of confusion at that time. We had considerable number of meetings. After a lot of soul searching, because the church, of course, was a part of the hearts and the minds of a lot of people for a long time, it was finally narrowed down to the point where there were only about ten people who felt that they just could not bring themselves to see the church relocated. But, we had an official meeting, and after a lot of facts were presented, there was a vote cast. If I remember the count, I don't think that there were any more than about two who did not vote in favor of relocating.

R: Were there various locations under consideration?

- I: It was also a part of this committee's function that in the event relocation was decided to be the avenue that we should go, that they also try to find some suitable sites on which we could build. As of the time that this came to a head as a result of the burning of the church, there were probably five sites that we might have considered. Fortunately, one of the sites, which was the final selection, three parcels of ground were owned by Ernie and Mary Withers, and the adjacent parcel was available to buy. Our recommendation was that we relocate at Route 224 on the Boardman-Poland Road just west of Poland. The three parcels of ground were donated by the Withers, the fourth parcel of ground, we purchased.
- R: While the church was under construction, where were the services held and the educational programs of the church itself?
- L: When the church burned, there was really only half of the church, the front section, that was damaged. The Christian Education section in the rear was usable. We continued services in the Christian Education Division until we had the new church completed.
- R: What was done by the members of the congregation to get themselves involved in collecting money to the church financed?
- L: Well, we were fortunate in this respect, that prior to the church's burning, one of the committees in the church had investigated the amount of insurance that we had on the property. It was determined at that time that it was not enough. Fortunately, we increased the insurance a reasonably short period of time before the fire, so we had a fairly good insurance settlement to start work with. Then we sold the residue of the church and the property to D.D. Davis, a general contractor in town. With the money from the sale, the money from the insurance proceeds, and a loan that we procured, we had sufficient money to at least think about starting. Quite frankly, it was far from being enough to meet the goal that we had, but it just seemed as if everybody felt that they had the confidence and the faith that everything would fall in line.
- R: How many members were in the congregation at that time?
- L: As I recall, there were approximately--I'm not sure of the exact figure--but I would estimate that we had in the neighborhood of 750 people.
- R: Of what ethnic backgrounds typical of Youngstown. That would be almost any nationality that you can think of

because Youngstown is a melting pot taking English, Welsh, Italian, and Irish. I think we had them all.

R: So, what were some of the various activities that the people got themselves involved in order to contribute to the finances of the church?

L: Probably the principal thing that we got involved in to bolster the finances of the church was we started a restaurant affair at the Canfield Fair. For about a ten or twelve year period during Canfield Fair days, we sold and served food at a great big tent. At that time, everybody was involved washing dishes, cooking, cleaning up, serving, and anything that you can think of. Now, the thing that stands out primarily in the deal was the pie baking that went on. Mabel Miller and others of the church--I think of Mable particularly in the pie baking category--baked pie, after pie, after pie. We got quite a name as being pie makers. We were making somewhere in the neighborhood of \$10,000 a year off that endeavor.

R: Who initiated this pie making order for them here in the Canfield Fair?

L: I don't honestly know. I was going to say it was just one of those things that happened, but things don't just happen. Somebody had to be behind it, and I can't tell you.

R: How many years did it take for the new church to become fully completed?

L: I would say, if you talk fully completed. . . . See, we went through two stages. Because we had a limited amount of money, we were faced with two decisions. We could either build a church and sometime in the future build a Christian Education Division, or we could build the shell of both and then we could leave the finishing go until such time as we could take care of it. It was finally decided that it was smarter for us to build the entire program, exterior shell only, and not do the finish work until we were in a position to handle it. That's the basis on which we went. Now, to say how long we were under construction from start to finish, I would say we were probably four years before we got it totally completed. We were probably two years in construction of the main section of the church.

R: How long did it take for the church to finally be paid off completely?

L: I can't recall the exact date of that.

R: How many years have you been a member of this church?



L: I've been a member of the church since 1950.

R: Have you ever been to any other church besides the Methodist Church in Poland?

L: Well, we attended, when we first moved out to Poland, from a convenience standpoint, the United Presbyterian Church for a period of about six months. But then, like I say, on the recommendation of the Sunday School class from friends of ours, we attended the Sunday School class and chose the Methodist Church as the church that we wanted to attend.

R: After your initial involvement with the Methodist Church, there has been various stages of new ministers coming in and out of the congregation. Of the various ministers coming in and out, who do you feel was the most instrumental?

L: No one stands out particularly in my mind as being the most instrumental. Our church has always been a working church. I don't think that any particularly point of this is to the credit, primarily, of the minister. I think that the people in our church were the ones who were responsible. It's a working church. It's a common, medium class people who believe in their church. They believe that whatever is necessary to promote it is what they'll do. I think that, really, is the basis of why we were able to build a church that is sort of beyond the money resources we had.

R: During the 1960's era, what even sticks out in your mind the most about the church?

L: In the 1960's?

R: Yes.

L: Well, nothing comes to my mind specifically in the 1960's.

R: Who is the present leader of the church?

L: The present leader of the church is Reverend Santomen.

R: Can you tell me a little bit about this man's background?

L: No, I can't, because I haven't been active in the last several years as I was during the period of the construction of the church. As of the time the fire happened, I think everybody feels that sometime or another they have a thing to do. Since I was the

chairman of the committee that was to decide either on the relocation of the church or rebuilding in it's present site, and since I was so deeply involved in that and was close to the church, I was moved when the church burned. Since I was a contractor and had a lot of facilities at my disposal and a lot of experience at hand, I felt that this was my time to give my contribution--sacrifice, if it may be--to the church. So, in the course of the time that the new church was under construction, I served as co-chairman of the building committee with Ernest Withers. I was fortunate that I was in between jobs at the time and had a lot of time available. My equipment and my time contributed largely to the new building. I was not especially active on the finishing of the church, but on the original construction, I spent hours with Ernie Withers doing nothing except work on the church.

R: Were the surrounding churches in the village helpful in helping your church get off?

L: Oh yes. I think the loss of the Methodist Church by fire was a blow that everybody in Poland felt. I think everybody was disturbed by the fire. I think they were all sorrowful because of the loss of what was a real nice building that fit in well with the type of construction in Poland. I think they were very sympathetic. I think everybody did everything that they could possibly do to assist us and help us.

R: What exactly was done by the other churches? What were their contributions?

L: Well, I think their facilities were put at our disposal if we had an occasion that we wanted to use them. I think that they probably participated in our fund raising promotions. I think they attended our tent at the Canfield Fair and bought food and things from us. In general, I think everybody did everything that they possibly could do.

R: Was there an organization founded by the churches in order to service one that had. . . ?

L: None that I know of. It may have existed, but I didn't know of it.

R: Have you heard of this Interfaith Council that exists now in Poland?

L: Yes, a very good friend of mine, Virgil Roberts, was active in the Interfaith Council. I know roughly of its involvement in Poland.

R: What is the major function of this council?

- L: I think it was to promote a cooperative ecumenical association of all of the churches in Poland.
- R: Can you tell me a little bit of what is being done in regards to the church's preparation for the 159th Anniversary?
- L: No, I'm not too well acquainted with it outside of this project where you're preparing a history of the past events.
- R: What does a celebration of this kind symbolize to the community of Poland?
- L: The thing that it should symbolize in my mind more so than anything else is the stability and the long lasting aspects of religion itself--the Methodist Religion in particular--to have lasted this long. That it [Poland Methodist Church] stood up under all of the tests that it has probably been put to is indicative of that fact that it's a good, solid foundation on which to lean.
- R: Do you feel that the young people of the church are involving themselves as much as they possibly could?
- L: I don't think so. I think it's a shame today, to know that when we built the church, we made provision for Sunday School classes for every age group from birth up to all ages. The Sunday School classes in the lower age group are attended very well, but in the high school and junior high school age, they're not. Some place, our young people are not being attracted to church work.
- R: What do you think can be done to motivate young people to get themselves more involved with the religious aspects of life?
- L: Well, if I were to make one suggestion that I think would help church participation, it may sound like a simple, not too meaningful thing, but I think that if we were to simplify the service a little more--by that I mean get an emphasis of sincerity. . . . I think a little less of the ritual, and a little more involvement in things that are meaningful to children, kids, and grownups. . . . I think also, if we were to get some new hymns and have them chosen by, primarily, lay-musicians, not musicians who are very capable of singing high notes and low notes, but getting a range of songs that just the ordinary people can sing. . . . I think everybody goes to church and wants to sing. We've got hymns that the range is such that you're embarrassed to try. I think if the hymns were better

so that the sincere feeling of religion that's gained by singing, I think more people would participate, and I think you'd have a better acceptance.

R: How many members are there to the congregation today?

L: I would guess that there are probably about nine hundred.

R: Has there been an impact felt by your church since our present crisis situation with unemployment, inflation, and all this stuff that's going on in society?

L: I'd have to believe that any crisis in the area certainly affects the church. The first thing that happens always is that if the budget at home is cut, then the giving to the church gets cut proportionately. The budget of the church then has to be adjusted to fit that. I'd certainly say that the crisis in Youngstown has probably affected the giving. Although, our church always seems to face up to necessity. I know that there have been times when I watched the giving, when, early in the stages, the pledges did not come through to the expectation. But, always the money came through. We might have, as of the time that every member canvassed, fulfilled the amount that we were working toward, but we always collected the amount of money that was needed.

R: What do you think can be done to counter attack such a crisis?

L: I don't really know. I would say, of course, that if the crisis affects the budget, then the budget has to be cut and probably some of the services cut. But, so far I haven't seen the necessity of this. As I say, our church is a dependable, common sense church. If something is needed, I guess we just dig a little deeper and get it.

R: Are there any various programs within the church right now that are there or established for the specific reason to counter such a crisis situation?

L: Not to my knowledge. There may be, but I don't know of them if there are. I would say that the normal committees that we have probably are able to face up to the situation. I don't know of any specials that we have had to cover this.

R: Where do you see the Methodist Church headed in the near future?

- R: Oh, I don't see any big change in the Methodist Church. My observations of the church are that they're just staying even, which is probably a step backwards because, as time goes on, they should grow. [It has], in my observations in the last five or ten years, remained fairly constant. But, I think this is true of all churches. I don't think it is just true of the Methodist. I think that something's going to have to happen that will revolutionize the thinking of people and get them back closer to religion. I don't know whether the people are going to have to do this themselves or whether the churches are going to have to do it to inspire them. Somewhere the church has lost a lot of its young people. I'm not prepared to decide why, I'm not even prepared to say how they're going to get them back, but I know that unless they get the young people back to church, that the church has to decline, it can't grow. I just don't know the answer to the deal. I don't think this is just my idea. I think, probably, the experts in the church field know, and they don't have the answer to it either. So, I couldn't tell you.
- R: Are there any other major events that occurred during your membership of the church that might be relevant to this interview today?
- L: None that I can think of. The thing, of course, that stands out the most in my mind, because I was more actively involved in that than anything else, of course, was the fire, and the building of the church that inspired the closeness of the people, the hard work, the sacrifice giving, and the sacrifice work. That's the principle thing, in my opinion, that stands out the most in the last fifteen years of this church.
- R: Nothing ever really occurred that was major before that fire that you might recall?
- L: Nothing that I can think of that stands out. I think probably there were things that, because of the fact that the fire and the church itself stand out so big in my mind that they overshadow anything else. The other things that may be of great importance to somebody else are overshadowed by the fire and the rebuilding of the church. I can't come out with any.
- R: One final question: In regards to the burning of the church, do you feel that the church was set on fire deliberately or was that a minor [occurrence] or some major [occurrence] of some wiring in the church itself?
- L: I don't think anybody will ever know. I have reason to believe in my mind that it was faulty wiring in the church. The fire was determined to have started behind the organ console. To the best of my knowledge, that

the most acceptable explanation that I've heard of it. I have a very peculiar opinion as of now. As of the time of the fire, of course, I was upset and heartbroken as anybody in the congregation because I felt that the church was near and close to me. Today, as I look back on the issue, I think that the fire was more a blessing than it was a curse. I think it forced us to make a decision that was inevitable--that we had to relocate. It forced us to scratch and dig and sacrifice to come up with a church in size and services that are probably ten times what the other ones were. I just think that it was a blessing that it happened.

R: Do you feel that most members of the congregation feel the same way?

L: I'd have to believe so. Of course, I don't want that to sound just as though it's a hard and cold blessing. I think it's a tempered blessing. I think it's the kind of a thing that, sure we all have some regrets about the old church. We have some fond memories. We have some things that we remember especially. I always think of the big stained-glass window in our church. It just seemed to me that the picture of Jesus that was on that stained-glass window . . . the sun seemed to shine through that and it, just seemed to me that he was looking always at me. Now, those kind of memories . . . when that window gets broken, and those kind of things happen, you just can't consider that to be a blessing. But then, if you look at it overall, the real purpose of the church is to serve as many people as it possibly can. Certainly, the new church that we have, physically, if nothing else, is in a better position to do it than what the old church was.

R: To conclude, what does this 150th Anniversary of the Methodist Church mean to you?

L: Well, primarily it means to me that we withstood, like I said earlier in the interview, the test of time. It's just another milestone along the way and another step up the ladder to another 150 years.

R: Mr. Lewis, on behalf of the Youngstown State University Oral History Program and myself, I would like to express my thanks for your time and effort today. Thank you.

L: You're most welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW