

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Poland Methodist Church

Personal Experience

O.H 1030

MARY WITHERS

Interviewed

by

Wilfredo Rivera

on

April 23, 1981

MARY ELIZABETH WITHERS

Mary Withers was born on March 12, 1907, the daughter of James and Florence Pallatino, in New Castle, Pennsylvania. She attended school and graduated from New Castle High School. She married and had a family of three.

She was never employed but was very active in the community. Mary was a member of Poland's United Methodist Church and for sixteen years was the District Coordinator of Children's Ministries. She enjoys growing flowers and plants, sewing, knitting, crocheting, and art.

R This is an interview with Mary Withers for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Poland United Methodist Church by Willie Rivera at 412 South Main Street Poland, Ohio, on April 23, 1981, at approximately 12:15 p.m.

Mrs Withers, could you tell me where your father and mother were born and what stories you recall of your families past?

W Yes, I can very proudly say that my mother and father were both born in Italy and both of them were orphans when they came here. My dad's parents died. His father died when he was nine and his mother died when he was ten. My aunt and her husband came to the United States and settled in New Castle, Pennsylvania. And then they sent for the family that were in Italy. My dad was the oldest, and she raised them here.

My mother came later. They did not know each other in Italy. Her mother was not capable of raising her when she was born and she was fostered by a foster mother, nursed and taken care of. Then when she was seven years of age her mother wanted her to come back to her, and of course, she only knew her foster mother and she refused to go to her natural mother. Well, her natural mother forced her to come to her and when she did, she was very ill and broken hearted that she had lost what she thought was her natural mother.

So then, counselors and the Catholic Church there, of course, the priest went and talked to her natural mother and said, "You are going to lose your daughter unless she goes back to her foster mother." And she finally said, "Alright." And when she sent her daughter back to the foster mother she died a few months later because she was not well to start with.

So then, my mother came here at the age of 18 with a friend that knew my dad in the United States. And she came here not knowing about her and who she knew. She just came for an adventure. So when she came here, she introduced my mother to her friend that she knew, who was my dad, and they were married shortly after. And so, they made their home in New Castle, Pennsylvania.

They had a family. There were nine of us in the family and I was the oldest. And of course, I was the first one to be married. I married my husband and we settled first in Warren, Ohio. My husband was in the plumbing and heating business. Then our business grew out this way and this was right in the middle of New Castle and Warren, so we settled in Poland and that was 40 years ago.

So, we started to go here to Boardman Methodist Church first because we intended to build our home and business in Boardman. And as it happened, everything was built up around here and so we stayed in Boardman five years and then we thought our children were going to Poland Schools and we joined the Poland Methodist Church.

- R What did your parents do while you were a child? What kind of work activities were they involved in?
- W. My father worked at Carnegie Steel Company Then my mother started a grocery business and I worked with her in the grocery business We worked in the grocery business for quite some time My mother was very ill all through her life Of course, raising nine children, she was not in very good health She died at the age of 63 Then my dad came to live with me He lived here, I believe, for 13 years
But he worked in the steel mill and then when they shut down in New Castle, he went to work at Shenango Pottery Then when he retired, of course my mother died, and he came to live with me
- R Was your relationship with your mother and father very distant or very close?
- W Oh, we were a close family
- R Did that hold true with your relatives also?
- W Yes
- R Is that one of those extended families, very constant?
- W Yes
- R. Alright, within your family, what did your family discuss the most and why? Did they stress hard work? Did they stress religion? Did they stress education or did they stress a career?
- W They stressed religion, education, and helping others We were a very prayerful family. In those days we had what they called the pot belly coal stove and we would sit around the stove Every evening we would have our evening worship and it was a very, very loving and religious family. On Saturday night we were not permitted to go any place except prepare for church on Sunday morning That was the way we were raised
- R What did your parents want you to do with your life once you were old enough to make your own decisions?
- W Well, I wanted to be a teacher In those days, the first assignment for a school teacher was to go out into a country school And of course, my mother being very timid, did not think that I should be going out into the

country and teach. So she did not want me to do that. And then I wanted to be a nurse. She did not think a girl should be doing that and so she discouraged that and I did not get to do that.

So what I ended up being was a secretary. I just had two years in high school and I was a secretary. Then of course, I helped her with her business.

Then I went to work at Shenango Pottery. I was doing special hand painting on china. I became the one that did all the designs and special work that went out into different companies. I worked there for 16 years.

R: Well, when you were young, what did you do with your earnings? Did you give it to your parents or did you take it and invest it elsewhere?

W: I gave it all to my parents.

R: So, they handled all the financial matters in the household?

W: Right.

R: So, what was your last job?

W: Shenango Pottery.

R: Shenango Pottery?

W: Yes.

R: And what are you presently doing now?

W: I am affiliated with my husband. I was with his business. He is retired now. He was in the plumbing and heating business. I was his secretary for him when I married him and also a housewife. Now we are affiliated with this plaza here. This is what we both do now is just take care of the plaza. My son takes care of the maintenance in the plaza. And this is what we do now.

R: You said that you retired from the Shenango Pottery?

W: Well, I quit there when I married my husband.

R: Okay. While you were working for the Shenango Pottery, did you ever want to leave that job and do something else?

W: No, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed doing the art work that I did. I never looked for

anything else after I worked there

R. Would you say your successful in your career today?

W. Yes, I would think so. Yes. I am very happy with what I have done in my life. I enjoyed it.

R. Who would you say was the major influence or gave a major contribution to your success today?

W. Well, I think that my mothers way of living was one. She always said, "Do what you like to do and if you do not enjoy it then try something else." But she was very modest and wanted to make sure that whatever we did was modest and that is why she did not like teaching and nursing for me. She did not think that that was modest especially when you had to go in the country and in the hospital and be associated with working with men and what have you. She did not think that was modest.

R. In regards to education, was it stressed in the family while you were young?

W. Yes, it was stressed, but you see, being the oldest she could not afford it. I did not want to go on to college. I was the oldest and I had to go to work and help the family so I did not get any further education. All the education that I had was what I studied, some self-education in books.

R. Would you say that your parents were strict authoritarian type parents?

W. Very much so. Yes, they were.

R. I am interested in the cultural up bringing that you had. Did you live in an ethnic neighborhood or was it comprised of just one group of families more or less?

W. No, I was raised in an ethnic neighborhood. We had Polish and German and Welsh and there were the Italians. Those were the main ones that I remember living close to me.

R. Were you anxious to leave the neighborhood when you had to leave?

W. No, we have always had a wonderful relationship with our neighbors.

R. Could you tell me some of the stories or some of the major events that

occurred while attending the Southern Methodist Church over here in Poland? Could you tell me the first major event to the present major event?

W When we came to the Poland Methodist Church, it was in the old church. It was located where the Union National Bank is now here in Poland. We enjoyed it very much and the people were friendly and the minister that was there at the time was a very wonderful person and we were immediately active here in this church.

I was teaching in the church school in Boardman and I was teaching here immediately as soon as we came here. I was teaching the sophomores in the church school. And then from there they had a sixth grade class coming into the elementary section and there were 30 in the class. And then they asked me if I would take the sixth grade because the teachers that had them from kindergarten on up had had problems and they thought that I had done a job with the sophomores that perhaps I could handle this class. I said, "Well, I would have to think about that because I am enjoying this group and I have had such a wonderful relationship with them and I would like to stay here." Well, they said, "Would you try?" I said, "Yes, I will try."

So I tried the sixth grade and I really had a real wonderful time with that group. Well, we only had a room about the size of this for 36 children in the old church. I really remember that class because we had such a wonderful time. And I have had some of them that were in that class that were active in the church now and that was a great experience.

Then from then on, I was asked if I would be the church school superintendent and I did not know what to do about that because I did not know that I had enough experience to do that job well. My husband's brother was a Methodist minister and I talked with him and I said, "What do you think? Do you think that I could do that?" And he said, "Why of course you can." So I took that job and I was Church School Superintendent from 1958 to 1964. I had a great relationship with the teachers, but of course I took a lot of training in order to do that. Then when I retired as Church School Superintendent I went for training to be a laboratory instructor for third and fourth grade, which was the middle elementary group. I took some training from there for several months and I became certified for that. So I went out then into the district, I was asked if I would take District Coordinator of Children's Ministry which I did. I went into three counties, Mahoning, Ashtubula, and Trumbull Counties to train church school teachers and still be active in my own church.

I really think that did more for me than I think I did for the ones that I had worked with because it was just a tremendous experience to be out with other people other than your own church. So I was in the district for 16 years doing that work.

I also worked in the Council of Churches for 12 years. I was the Director

of Childrens Work in the Council of Churches. That was another wonderful experience, working with people other than the Methodist denomination I was working with all of them and I found that they just had a different name We all had the same belief, and the same God, and the same relationship and love It was really tremendous in network So, I enjoyed all of it, it was just great

R You mentioned that this church was located where the bank is now What happened for it to relocate else where? Where it is presently?

W The church burned down April 1, 1957 Then we had purchased property around the church to enlarge the facilities that we had there, but when the church burned down, the committees talked about relocating The people that were there for years were protesting that idea because they, of course, liked the present location But it came to a vote where they thought that relocating would be better to try to just work around the old church We relocated and relocated in Boardman, it was Boardman Township, but it was on Route 224 And we started building that church and my husband was the Chairman of the Building Committee He drew the floor plans of the whole church on what it should be and then the architect was called in to check the plans and see what he thought about them Then he drew the plans for the exterior of the church

We never liked to publicize this, but we have three acres of ground there that we donated for the church and another member of the church donated another acre so the church is sitting on four acres of land

So, with all of the permission of the congregation and the district and the conference, we started building that church right away after the fire in 1957 In 1958 we were in our new church, but it was not completed, we were just in the shell Then we had the church school rooms with no doors and I was Church School Superintendent then and we used the church as it was, working on it, completing it Then the church school treasury had \$1,000 in it When we needed doors so badly for our church school rooms, why we went to the Commission of Education and asked if we could not use that money to buy doors for the church school classroom And we did that and we bought doors and they were put on by volunteer workers and my husband led the group in installing them and painting them and all of that and it was all done by volunteer workmen And so we had the doors and little by little when we went on working little by little as we went on Then we borrowed money to complete the church and it was completed, now I am not so sure of the date, but I think it was in 1959 that the church was completed and dedicated We were pretty proud of that. We were very good We have a beautiful facilities

R. Who was the leader of the church when the church first burned down?

W: It was Reverend Dean M. Marston. He was the minister then

R: And he was the one that promoted the building of the second church?

W: Yes

R: The drive itself?

W: Yes.

R: Did he see the church finally being built, constructed that date you stated before?

W: Yes, he was there up until it was completed

R: How long did he stay with the church there after?

W: He was there eight years

W: Yes

R: Then retired?

W: Then, of course, with the Methodist ministers, they move on. He moved on to, I cannot think of the name. I did a lab school there too and I cannot think of the name right now, but he went there and the minister from there came here and his name was John Knox Hess, he came to our church. He did a nice job of completing the ministry because we had been building so much that we had forgotten what the ministry was and Reverend Hess helped us to see what the real ministry of the church was. Then after him was Glen Lockharte, then after him was Al Hubler and now our present minister, who is wonderful is Reverend Joe Santaman. He is very, very wonderful. We love him. He is great.

R: Can you tell me a little bit about this new Reverend, his background, where he came from?

W: Yes, he is from an Italian background and he had four lovely daughters and a lovely wife. I happened to do a lab school in Greentown, where he came from, and I met him there. I had some of the teachers from his church in my class and they spoke very well of him and he was there 12 years. When he was coming here, I did not know that he was coming here, When he was appointed here, I heard who he was and was happy because I had met him there and he was so lovely and I was happy that

he came here and still am happy with him, he is just wonderful I hope he stays with us 12 years.

R How many years does a minister stay at the church?

W As a rule five, six, or seven I do not know of any that have stayed more than 12 years, but they can if they want If they advance themselves to a bigger and better church, why they can go if they want That is the way they work in our Methodist Conference

R How many members are there to the church or families in the community that attend the church itself?

W Well, I think we have an average of, I would say, about 300 that attend church every Sunday, but we must have about 400 families

R Within these 400 families, what does a celebration of the 150th anniversary of the United Methodist Church mean to them, the people in general?

W Well, it becomes a very significant celebration because of some of the background of the people who have in the past, built the church Now I know we have met so many people before us that have passed away now and some of the work that they had done that hailed to us It is really a wonderful celebration that we now have the work that they have done and some that we have done that our future congregation will enjoy as we build in what they will do when we are gone

I know that we celebrated the 200th anniversary of the Methodist Church and that was quite a celebration because it was started by the founders of the Methodist Church It took two or three of the people to start a school and it went on and on until it grew and grew where we have large church schools But I am sorry to say that it seems to be decreasing Now, as I said I had 36 in my sixth grade, now if we have 12, why we think we have a big class Of course, I cannot understand why this is happening I really do not know Some say because of our birth rate count it could be, but I am hoping that it is not that they are losing the religious faith

R Do you have any ideas that may contribute to younger people that go to those schools at the church?

W Well, I think in my experience was that when I had my classes I visited every child I had in the class I went into their homes and visited them and when they come I would send them a card and I would call them and

go and visit again if they missed too many Sunday's And I think that this was one reason why teachers in the past did this, but the teachers that we have now, most of them are working and they do not have the time Of course, I was working too, but I was working at home here I was a secretary and I had I think, a little more time that I could just take off and go where they cannot if they are employed elsewhere And I think this is contributing to that factor, where they do not have the time to really show their care and concern and love for their classes like it should be I really think that this is really the main factor

R In the future, where do you see the education program of the church going or headed what direction?

W I do not know that I can answer that in what direction it is going. I know that the teachers do not have time to be trained like we went for training. I know because I went and worked in laboratory school where I would have 17, 18, 20 teachers in training and I would have 20 children in the class That does not happen anymore If we get four or five teachers in a class now, we are doing real good and if we get about 10 children we are doing good. So, I really cannot answer what direction we are going

I do really think that a teacher who is teaching needs the training to do a job, mainly because I think the children of today, a sixth grader now is like what a junior high youngster was when I was teaching the sixth grade, of course I was teaching the sixth grade just two years ago And I find that they certainly need a lot of guidance and a lot of leading in order for them to grasp because they seem to know more than we do and they want answers to some questions that sometimes we are not able to answer unless we have the training And that is what I think is needed in the church school, a lot of training

R. Is this educational system established in the church, is it funded by a board, like the Board of Education in Youngstown or is it on a volunteer ship basis these teachers come in on the weekends and do their instruction?

W It is all volunteer, yes It is volunteering They have the Commission of Education, they have the Chairman of the Commission of Education and then they have, when I was Superintendent they called it the Superintendent of the Church School, now they call it the Director of the Church School Study and that is what Dr Viehmeyer is now. He is on the Commission of Education Then they have two teachers, the Coordinator of Youth Work, the Coordinator of the Elementary, and the Coordinator of the Adults and all of those people are on the Commission on Education

They come in monthly to a meeting to determine what the Church school needs are from each section One of the greatest needs, which is training,

seems to be pulled by the wayside. The people do not seem to think that they need training.

R: What does this celebration, I am not sure when it is the date, but what does it symbolize to you and your family?

W: To our family, of course, I have always participated in these celebrations. I was Chairman of the 200th year in Church School. I really cannot explain the joy and the celebration. It is really an excitement for our family. We were really excited about the celebration. It is just like the 4th of July would be to us and the American people. It is a great celebration and Christmas and Easter, all of these. It is just really an excitement that you can just feel the greatness of it and I am sure that many of the people in the congregation do because they are present for the celebration and I feel that they feel it top.

R: The members of the church, are the majority of them Italians, Slovak or Polish? What is the majority of the congregation?

W: I think we have a great mixture. I would not know what the majority of them are now because I know we just have everything. I do not even know how many Italians we have now. I know we have quite a few and I know that there are some Polish people and I know we have some German people, but it is just a mixture of all nationalities.

R: So, when the celebration comes up there is not a specific custom that this group of people follows?

W: Well, the custom is of the Methodist background. It is all on the Methodist customs and Methodist beliefs and all in the Methodist background. It is not any ethnic background.

R: Can you give me some idea of some of the customs practiced by the Methodist?

W: Yes, the Methodist used to be, they were called the "shouting" Methodist because they used to shout and sing. Of course, that has changed and of course, the main thing is faith and education. The Methodists were the first to go into education. They started schools and what have you outside of the Church School. So the Methodist, to my understanding have been great for education and that is one thing that the Methodist church is known for.

When I was working in the Council of Churches I found that the Methodist

Church was the only church that had this training, but the other churches only received it through the Council of Churches because they did not have any. In the Presbyterian Church they had some training through the Presbytery, but the majority of the trained teachers were from the Methodist Church because we have it often.

R: Can you tell me some of the things that are occurring today in preparation of the celebration? Can you give me some dates in regards to, well, the day of the celebration itself?

W: When the date will be?

R: Right.

W: Let me see, I have the Centennial Book downstairs. I do not know, I think it is going to be in June, when we are going to be having the celebration.

R: How long will it last?

W: A week.

R: One whole week?

W: Yes.

R: Are there any specific ceremonies occurring within that week?

W: Yes, they will have ceremonies. They will be having families joining together for dinners and worship and they will be calling all the former ministers that were here and any of the older people that can tell about what they knew and all of this will come out in the celebration.

R: I understand that there is a Daniel Santilli in the church, he is a member of the congregation and he is the music director. Is that correct?

W: Yes, that is correct.

R: Can you tell me something about his background?

W: He is Italian.

R: His role in the church?

W Dan has been with us over 20 years and he is of an Italian background and he is, I think, the finest person for music that I know. He really knows music and he has done a terrific job with the choir. We have a fine choir and it is through his efforts. His daughter is directing the Childrens Choir, he had directed the bell choir and he has had a choir festival that was outstanding. He does a wonderful job with music.

R How does music stand in the church overall?

W Music takes a great part of the worship. Music can really give you that exciting feeling of worship. Without music, I do not know if it would be as great as it is with music.

R From my understanding, I see that the church plays a major factor in your life. What are some of the values that you stressed on your children about the church or education or anything of any importance?

W Well, I stressed to my children the same thing. Now they were raised up here in the church, two of them, the other one, of course, was in New Castle. They were raised here in the church but I am sorry to say that my own son that is here now, the others are away, he does not seem to see it as I do and I do not try to force him. He is married and he had two little girls. His little girls come to Sunday School, but I do not know. Now his wife is Catholic and I said, "Well it does not matter to me if you go to the Catholic Church, just so you go." But I am very sorry to say. Maybe he is beginning to see it because last Sunday when they were in church, they seemed to have hit them and, of course, I hope and pray that perhaps they will see it as I do. But as long as they have love in their family and love each other, I think that is a big part of it, but I think without the church it does not continue because I do not know what I would have done without my church.

R Were these values pressed upon you while you were a child by your parents?

W Oh yes. My mother said, "You cannot do anything without the Church and God. Sometimes you think you can, Oh I do not need to go to church to see God, and I found that out, that you cannot.

I think this is important that I would like to share. When we first moved here we had so much to do here in this building that for about a year we did not think about going to church because we were so busy. After a year, I said to my husband I said, "You know that I just feel like something is missing. I do not seem to get anywhere." I said, "We should better start going to church. So he

said, "Alright." So we started going to church and I felt it right away and this is what I tell my son

We have three boys, which I have not said, "One is in Texas, one is in Florida, and this one is here " And I tell them that they cannot do anything on their own unless they see God and remember to go to church because you can very soon forget if you do not go to church You do not go one Sunday and you do not go the second, you do not go the next Sunday and you do not go for a while then you begin to forget everything else You have to be reminded just like a child. If you let a child do something and do not correct him and then he keeps on doing it and keeps on doing it and that is what happens if you do not go to church, you just forget I think this is something that I did want you go to church and worship God in church because that helps you worship God away from church, otherwise you will soon forget.

R You were born Catholic were you not?

W Yes

R Why did you convert to Southern Methodist?

W Well, I converted to Methodist I really was not happy with the Catholic Church because they seemed to have beliefs that were unreal When I went to the Methodist Church, of course my husband was a Methodist, and I went to the Methodist Church, I saw the reality You see, what we learned in the Catholic Church were written prayers, you did not have prayers of your own and I learned in the Methodist Church where you really talked to God with your own prayers and I liked that

Now I went to the funeral home last night, my brother's wife died, of course she was Catholic, and the priest was there and he prayed the Rosary and of course the Rosary was prayed There was not one word said about the family, about the dead person, it was just the Rosary, you know and got up and said goodbye and that was it Now to me, I think if he should have said something to the family to comfort them on how God will comfort the family and prayed, said something about the dead person, like we do in the Methodist Church or other Protestant Churches To me that would be real and I was not happy with the Catholic Church

Of course, when I went into the Methodist Church at first I thought, you see in the Catholic Church if you leave the Catholic Church you are done, that is it You have no place in heaven and this is what they taught us and that is not so and I have found it in the Methodist Church just as well and I feel that you can express yourself in the Methodist Church You have better education in the Methodist Church and I have had another experience as I was Chairman of the Vocation Church Schools in the Council of Churches and here in the community

in Poland, that I worked with the Catholic Church and the nuns and the priests. Of course, they only have religious education before they receive the Eucharist. They do not have a Sunday School like we do and that the Catholic Children, we had more Catholic Children in our Community Vocation of Church Schools than we have our Protestant because they go every Sunday and of course, these children do not go at all. We had more Catholic Children in our vocation church schools.

I found that to be a real experience and the nuns, they met right here in our recreation room downstairs, and we planned it. We chose the material that we were going to use and they were really thrilled with what we had and they came in and talked right with us. I thought that was the greatest thing that ever happened, where we could be together because when we first moved here it was the Presbyterian Church and the Methodist Church and the Presbyterians hated the Methodist and the Methodist hated the Presbyterians and I could not see that. If we cannot love each other in the religious way, what are we going to do otherwise. Then we finally worked together with the Presbyterian Church, then we got a Catholic Church, we have a Baptist Church, and we have a Lutheran Church, now we all work together and that is the greatest thing, I think, that has happened in my life that I really cannot explain the excitement of working together in a religious group.

Then, in the Council of Churches we also had the Jewish people that worked with Rabbi. We used to call it the Christian School. We did not call it that anymore, we called it the School of Religion, where we had the Catholics, the Jews, the Protestants, and we all worked together. I think this is what Jesus was saying.

R: How have the other members of the congregation reacted to this unification of the churches in Poland?

W: I think that, from my experience, that they all seem to be happy with it. They really seem to think that this is the time that we are understanding each other.

R: When was this movement started for this unification of the churches in Poland?

W: I would say it started about 10 years ago. About 10 years ago it was just picking up. It was just the Methodist and the Presbyterians living together and then the clergy, they started what they called the Poland Interfaith Council and then there were as many laity as there were clergymen. They got together and then they got some people, like me, to come in and help them with the education and that is how it started.

R Is there any other events in the beginning or when you first became a member of the United Methodist Church in Poland to the present time that have occurred that might be of some significance to me?

W Well, I do not know what I can say to you other than how excited I am. I do not know what background you are, but I would say that I think you might be excited in the Methodist Church and their education program. I think you would be interested in their youth and what they do. You would be interested in the young couples. I do not know if you are married. The young couples have a wonderful group where they meet together for Bible Study and for entertainment. But the Methodist Church, to me, is really an outstanding religious faith.

R In the future for the final question, what do you see your church, your congregation, the Methodist Church doing after the celebration?

W Well, I think after the celebration it will still be well and living and going because each one of these celebrations seem to make us grow. It is just like a child, it keeps growing and growing and I think that we never quit growing. Although we still need to grow, and this growth only comes from these celebrations that you can see what has happened and what will happen and what we need to do for more growth for the future church and each one of these celebrations will do just that.

R On behalf of the Youngstown State University Oral History Department, I would like to thank you for your time and your effort. Thank you.

W Thank you

End of Interview