

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Poland United Methodist Church
150th Anniversary Project

History of Methodism in Poland

O.H. 176

HELEN L. WITHERS

Interviewed

by

Wilfredo Rivera

on

April 18, 1981

HELEN LUCILLE WITHERS

Helen Withers was born on July 15, 1912, the daughter of Arch and Helen Paulin, in Woodworth, Ohio. She attended elementary and high school in Poland. She decided to further her education by attending Youngstown College, but was unable to complete her education due to the Depression. She is married to Harold Withers and is the mother of two children.

Helen was employed as a bookkeeper for many years and is presently retired. She is an active member of the United Methodist Church in Poland and has a personal interest in sewing and small crafts.

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INTERVIEWEE: HELEN L. WITHERS
INTERVIEWER: Wilfredo Rivera
SUBJECT: Cohesiveness, relocation, reaction, arson,
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DATE: April 18, 1981

R: This is an interview with Mrs. Harold Withers for the Youngstown State University 150th Anniversary of Poland's United Methodist Church Project by Wilfredo Rivera at 35 Ohio Avenue, Poland, Ohio on April 18, 1981 at approximately 12:50 p.m.

Mrs. Withers, starting off, could you tell me where your father and mother were born and tell me some stories that you recall about your family's past?

W: My father was born April 28, 1887 in Beaver Township. My mother was born September 15, 1890 in Poland, Ohio. They spent most of their married life here.

My mother went to school and graduated from the--what was then--Poland High School. It was only a three-year high school. There were only two in her graduating class when she graduated. I believe the year was 1907.

We have always gone to the Methodist Church. It was part of us always. My mother was a member of the Methodist Church, the old wooden Methodist Church, which stood on the site where the Union Bank is now located. She went there until she was fourteen and then the brick church was built on the site of the wooden church. The wooden church was sold and moved from the location.

She remembered quite vividly the way of that church. She often talked about the interior of the old church. There were red carpets on the floor. It was heated by coal

stoves. At the time she went to it, it was a two story church. Previously it had been a one story building. But apparently, it grew and there was a need for more space for Sunday School. So, instead of putting a top on the building, they raised the building up and made a level underneath. So, the sanctuary then was on the second floor. Mother used to say when you came in you faced the congregation, so you didn't want to be late when you came to services.

There were oil hanging lamps from the ceiling, which they pulled down to light. The lower area was then used for Sunday School rooms and all the church activities they had.

- R: So, this is the very first church that was established as a Methodist Church?
- W: Yes. I might say too, that it was my great great grandmother, Elizabeth Barclay, who was a charter member of the very first Methodist Church, which was started in 1834.
- R: Okay, 1834. Can you remember your mother telling you or your mother's mother telling somebody in the family, any special celebrations or get-togethers that the church performed for the members of the congregation?
- W: Oh, they had all kinds of things that mother often mentioned. They had many church dinners. But one thing that she particularly mentioned--when they were getting ready to build the new brick church, of course, there was a need for money as there always is. She belonged to the young people's group at that time and they had what they called mush and milk socials then. That was one of their ways to raise money for the building of the new church. But they also had dinners.
- The commencement services for the Seminary here in Poland were held usually in the Methodist Church at that time.
- My mother was the one who went to the old church, of course, my grandmother too. But my mother talked to me more about it. Until when she was fourteen, then the new building was built.
- R: The new building?
- W: The brick building where the Union Bank now stands, which at that time was the new church building.
- R: In what year was this new building built?

W: 1904 I believe, is the cornerstone on that. That cornerstone was moved when we built the new church on Boardman Road. It is at the southwest corner of the church.

R: What happened to the other church?

W: We had a fire April 1, 1957. It destroyed the sanctuary, not the educational part, but the sanctuary was destroyed. The trustees decided, due to the lack of room there for parking, that it would be better to relocate.

R: So, how did the members of the church react when this, whatever, this fire, happened?

W: Well of course, it was a very tragic experience since the church was meaningful to many people in the congregation. That was a very sad time.

I think it's quite an example of the dedication of our congregation. In fifteen years, the church was completely paid for. I did a review of the building fund money when our church was dedicated. We received some gifts from private individuals.

Our congregation worked very hard. We had the tents at the Canfield Fair at that time, which brought us in a nice sum of money each year. The women baked pies and sold them. That was also another money making project. There were various money making projects.

As I broke down all the income, the pledges from individual members were the largest part that paid for the church. Each member was willing to make sacrifices on their own part in order to see this come about.

I would like to say too, in case it sounds mercenary and we're thinking only of ourselves in terms of a nice new church building--at the same time that we were building this building, we kept up all our missionary support of the Methodist Church and in addition supported two others in the mission field. We were willing to share.

R: This location where the church is erected now, was it the first location that they looked at or were there other locations talked about at that specific time?

W: That is something perhaps Mr. Withers can answer. He was on trustees at that time. I can't answer that. To my mind, that was the only one, but I wouldn't want to say. Ask Mr. Withers.

R: Could you recall what type of work your parents did while you were a child?

W: Well, my mother was a homemaker and my father was a carpenter and worked in the steel mills.

R: Were your parents able to attend school?

W: My mother graduated from high school here in Poland. My father didn't graduate from high school.

R: So, your parents lived here all their life also?

W: Yes.

R: What was the size of your family?

W: I have a brother.

R: How about your mother's family?

W: My mother had two brothers. My father came from a large family. There were ten children in his family.

R: And you were born in Poland yourself? Is that correct?

W: No, I was not born in Poland. I was born in Beaver Township. There was a short time when my parents did not live in Poland. They lived in Beaver Township. It's known as Woodworth now. So, it wasn't too far away.

R: Could you tell me what your parents stressed the most out of these four: Did they stress hard work; did they stress religion; did they stress education or did they stress a career?

W: What one they stressed the most?

R: Yes.

W: Well, religion was an integral part of our family. So, I would say perhaps religion would be first. Then second would be education. They did stress education. Of course, when I graduated from high school, it was in the middle of the Depression. I took some additional secretarial courses. But any plans I had made for college at that time had to be given up due to the Depression, which was 1930.

R: How did you overcome this?

W: You mean the disappointment?

R: Yes, yes.

W: Well, it's just one of those things you accept, I think you realized that at that time it's just something that can't be and so you go on and do the next best thing, for me, a business course. I was quite happy working in the business world.

R: What are you doing presently? What kind of work? Or before you retired?

W: I was a bookkeeper.

R: How many years did you do that?

W: Well, I worked before we were married. Then when the children were grown, I went back to work.

R: How big was your family, your own personal family?

W: We have a son and a daughter.

R: What are they doing presently?

W: Our son lives in Lexington, Kentucky, and our daughter lives in Saint Mary's City in Maryland.

R: What kind of work does your son do?

W: He's an executive of IBM Corporation.

R: And your daughter's married?

W: Yes, my daughter's married.

R: When you had your family together before they were married and went out in the real world out there, society, what did you stress the most of the four that I mentioned earlier?

W: Religion. We tried to see that it was a very strong part of their lives.

R: But why religion? What's so special about religion?

W: I think you have to have a guideline in your life. I can't think of a better one than some of the rules that we have. Treatment of other people; it's just our whole way of living. I can't think of a better background.

R: What does the church mean to you? The church before it burned down--what did that church mean to you?

- W: It was something that was very vital to me and an important part of my whole life.
- R: Could you tell me something about the members of the church back then? What kind of people or what ethnic background did attend the church itself?
- W: What ethnic background?
- R: Sure, or was there one specific background of people who went back then?
- W: Oh, mostly I would say German, English and that type of background at that particular time.
- R: At that specific time, this area here was it populated by those kind of people that you just mentioned?
- W: Mostly, yes.
- R: Were there any other types of people here of different origins?
- W: There was one colored family who lived in Poland for many, many years and were accepted in our church quite readily.
- R: What did the people do back then, the members of the church, for celebrations? What kind of customs were carried on and activities?
- W: You mean activities pertaining to the church calendar?
- R: Well, yes, if you want to refer to that that would be fine.
- W: Well, of course, McKinley attended the church. And for a long time we used to always have a McKinley Day Celebration, on the day of his birthday, which I believe is January 29. I remember that more as a child than in later years.
- Oh, there were always all kinds of celebrations, mother and daughter get-togethers, and the men of the church were organized and they promoted all kinds of celebrations, father and son banquets and others.
- R: Did you contribute to the celebration yourself?
- W: Yes, yes.
- R: And what exactly did you do?

W: Oh, helped plan some of them. Then, as a young person, I sang in the choir. Of course, there was always music involved. Then, taking part in Sunday School, Sunday School teaching. Helping the children with their performances. There were always some special celebrations for children.

R: What contributions are you providing now as a member of the new church?

W: At this time, we're busy. I'm historian of the church. So, I try to keep a record of the activities as they come along. I have a book in which I try to record everything and pictures of special occasions we have. That's my biggest job now.

I have served in many areas of the church, as in Sunday School teaching, women's organizations. I served as district treasurer to the women's organization in the district for five years. Oh, many other facets.

We helped with the young people's organization when our children were in the age group.

R: This comes from your bookkeeping experience in years in the past? And you enjoy doing this kind of work?

W: Yes, very much.

R: What exactly do you emphasize or did you emphasize when you were a school teacher for the church? What kind of history did you try to have them carry on about the church?

W: Well, I think, of course, the first one was to know God and love God. Then I think the other thing is respect, caring for others.

R: Do most of your friends attend the church?

W: Yes.

R: Did most of your friends back then in the old brick church attend church?

W: I'd say most of them.

R: How many members were involved in this congregation when you had the brick building or the brick church?

W: For a long time we had around 200 to 250 members. Then

we grew. I can't say at the time of the fire exactly how many members we had, probably 500 or 600,

R: Who was the leader of the church at the time?

W: Of the fire?

R: Yes.

W: Reverend Dean Marston was our minister.

R: What kind of man was he?

W: A very fine man, a very dedicated man.

R: Could you tell me more about his background, please?

W: His father was a Methodist minister and his brother is also a minister. A very dedicated man to the Lord, I would say. We have always found him a great spiritual help. He's still a very dear friend of our family.

R: What kind of activity did he perform for the church to get them involved, not only with the church--the church back then--but other churches in the surrounding area? Or was there a competition between the different religious sects in this area back then?

W: No, I wouldn't say there was competition at all.

R: Saying this church is better than their church and their idea is better?

W: No, I don't have that feeling at all. I grew up here. Of course, some of my friends naturally were going to the Presbyterian Church. I grew to know the Presbyterian ministers very well. I found them very friendly. We had a nice association between the two churches.

R: What did the priest or the minister back then try to do to promote this idea of fellowship or accepting others with different religious backgrounds?

W: I would say they all worked very hard. We always did many things together.

R: What were the values of the church back then, the values they stressed most; whereas, for example again, education, religion itself, career and hard work. I'm sure they emphasized something to that degree. Where was the most emphasis put.

- W: The most emphasis was put on religion, I'm certain. The molding of your life, I think; to be a good person, to be a worthwhile person and be able to take a place in society and to be able to contribute to society. I think it was just the building as a whole person in the way of God.
- R: Can you tell me from that time on how, after the fire and after they made up their minds of relocating elsewhere, instead of repairing the old church further . . . The church back then after it was burned, was it repairable?
- W: The sanctuary was completely destroyed. The educational unit was usable.
- R: So, who was the first promoter of relocating?
- W: Relocating, I think was probably a joint decision of the trustees of our church.
- R: I understand that the land was donated where the site was or where it is right now presently.
- W: Yes, it was.
- R: Could you tell me other major events that occurred since you were a member of the church?
- W: I think one of the ones, of course, most significant would be the dedication of the new church. We, Methodists, do not dedicate a church building until it is completely paid for. So, of course, that was very symbolic within fifteen years to be able to dedicate the building. It was consecrated when we moved in and had services.
- Some other significant things would be the fact that we had some young men go on as ministers from our church. We've had missionaries from our church, too.
- Of course, the Poland Methodist Church is also a member of the Interfaith Council here in Poland, which is composed of all the churches in Poland. We are very active in that.
- R: Could you tell me more about this Interfaith Council of Churches in here?
- W: Well, it's an organization of all the churches in Poland-- Holy Family, Prince of Peace Lutheran, Bethel Friends, there are some Baptist churches. And periodically there are joint meetings of the whole group involving all the

congregations. At Easter time, there was the sunrise service, sponsored by the Interfaith Council,

In fact, I think Poland has been a leader in this ecumenical bit. We have had Catholic priests from Holy Family Church come and help participate in a baptismal service at our church.

R: What are your reactions to this? How do you feel about this Interfaith administration?

W: I think it's wonderful. I think we have to work together.

R: With what goal? What's the goal in mind?

W: The same goal we work in our own church. We're all working to one goal. Perhaps we Methodists take a little different path than the Catholics, but we're all aiming toward the same thing.

R: Mrs. Withers, do you know about this celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Methodist Church? What does it symbolize to the people in the community?

W: I think it's very symbolic that the Methodist Church has been here. Our Methodist Church was here early in the founding of our community and has strived to be a center for worship, education, religion all these years. I think it's very symbolic that we have been here for 150 years.

R: What do you feel is the major purpose or the major goal of this celebration?

W: I really can't say. I would say the publicity perhaps. I don't think it will change our church's activities too much, except it will be a time for celebration. I think anything that has been that long certainly is a time for celebration. I think that's history.

R: When is the date set for this celebration?

W: It will be May 1984.

R: How many members are there in the church right now?

W: I think 1,000.

R: Who is the present leader of your church?

W: The Reverend Joseph Santomen. Our minister is our leader.

- R: Could you tell me something about his background?
- W: Well, I can't tell you too much about Reverend Santomen's background. He came from Greentown, Ohio and had been there for twelve years. The folks there were very reluctant to let him go. So, I think that speaks well for his service there. He's a very enthusiastic man and very outgoing. He has brought some new ideas to our church which I think are good.
- R: How many years does a priest or minister stay, not in office, but stay with the church before he goes to another?
- W: He stays as long as our bishop pleases. Our ministers are appointed by the bishop upon the recommendation of the cabinet, which is composed of the twelve district superintendents, the twelve men who are in charge of the districts in this conference of the Methodist Church. Of course, they make a recommendation to the bishop, but our bishop is the one who appoints our ministers.
- R: How many ministers have there been since the fire of the church, brick church?
- W: Well, let's see, there was Dean Marston.
- R: Could you tell me or describe a little bit about these various ministers as you go along?
- W: Well, Dean Marston was the one who was here when there was the fire. He worked very hard to see that the new church was finished. I think Dean Marston must have been here almost eight years. Then Glen Lockhart came.
- R: What year was that?
- W: No, wait a minute, John Hess I believe, came after Dean Marston. Then Glen Lockhart and Al Hubler and Joe Santomen.
- R: So, there were five ministers since the fire?
- W: Yes.
- R: And you recall all five?
- W: Oh yes.
- R: Could you tell me the differences of the five and their ideas?

- W: Yes, every minister is different just as all of us are different. I think each minister brings us something special in his own way. We, as a congregation need to love him for the special thing that he can bring us.
- R: Could you tell me which of the five priests or ministers first promoted the idea of this Interfaith Council? Who got it started?
- W: I really think that would have to go back to John Hess. The Methodists are a very wide awake people and always on top of things. Of course, I have been more involved with the women's organization of the church and I know women, for quite a long time, have been concerned with the ecumenical part of this.
- R: Mrs. Withers, can you tell me the major event that occurred while you were a member to this Methodist Church?
- W: The ground breaking for this new church.
- R: What specific celebrations occurred when they first broke ground?
- W: We had a special service. My mother was living at that time and our daughter was able to be there. So, there were three generations who had been through the three churches, which to me was a very symbolic thing; not only because it involved my own family, but also the prospect that our church could go on in spite of the tragedy.
- R: What year did this occur, this ground breaking ceremony?
- W: The church burned in 1957, so this was 1958.
- R: What year was the church finally completed?
- W: I believe it was 1962 when we had the consecration service.
- R: One final question Mrs. Withers, where do you see the church going in the future and the members of the church?
- W: I see them continuing the work that we have tried to do, to be aware of the needs of others in our community and in the world. I think our members will continue to do that. In the Methodist Church, we are taught to always be aware of needs of others. Seeing these younger people who come into the church very dedicated and very able, I'm certain that it will go on with the need wherever it is, whenever.

R: Mrs. Withers, is there anything or any special event you would like to mention about your membership of the church?

W: I can't think of any special events. Just as I said, the church just has been part of my family. It's just a very vital part of my life and the foundation in my life. It has a great deal of meaning. It's hard to express in words.

R: Well, in conclusion Mrs. Withers, on behalf of Youngstown State University Oral History Program and myself, I want to thank you for your time and your effort. Thank you Mrs. Withers.

END OF INTERVIEW