

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Swedish Baptist Church

Church Life

O. H. 430

AGNES E. HAMMAR

Interviewed

by

Rich Gustafson

on

June 11, 1979

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Agnes Johnson was born in Yatesboro, Pennsylvania on April 15, 1911. Her father, Frank, died when she was only ten months old and it was not soon after that when her mother decided to move to Youngstown, Ohio in 1915. She never attended high school, although she did enroll in the Halls Business College for business courses. She married Leonard Hammar on September 12, 1942. Mrs. Hammar has been active in a number of civic organizations, some of which include the American Red Cross, the Swedish Lodge, Vasa Order of America Harmony Lodge #465, and the Girls Missionary Guild. For her service in the American Red Cross she recently received a medallion commemorating her thirty years of service to this charitable organization at the Youngstown Hospital Association. (It is 37 years of service now). Her name appears on the plaque in the lobby of South Side Hospital.

Since the age of four, Mrs. Hammar has been an active member in the Swedish Baptist Church, now known as Evangel Baptist Church. Groups which she has been an active member in include Girls Missionary Guild, the Senior Choir, and the Sunday School Music Department. She is especially an excellent source for the Swedish immigration in Youngstown since she has remained actively involved with the Swedish Vasa Order of America located in this city.

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INTERVIEWEE: AGNES HAMMAR

INTERVIEWER: Rich Gustafson

SUBJECT: Beginning of the church, Linwood Camping Program,
social activities of the church, pastors

DATE: June 11, 1979

G: This is an interview with Agnes Hammar for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, Swedish Baptist Church Project on June 11, 1979, at 2:00 p.m. at 242 Lowell Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio.

Tell me about your parents, family, occupations, when you were born.

H: I was born in Yatesboro, Pennsylvania, a coal mining town. My parents were Frank and Hannah Johnson. Unfortunately, my father died when I was only ten months old. There were six of us kids. When I was four, my mother decided that a coal mining town was no place to raise a group of kids. She ventured over to Youngstown, Ohio in February of 1915. My oldest brother at that time was married, but my sister and I came with my mother and three brothers. We all lived together. It seems kind of strange. We had two bedrooms, one bath, and a big attic. There was my mother and five of us kids, my married brother, his wife, and a child. We also had two boarders. We lived! Whoever went to bed first got the best part of the bed. None of us were ever denied anything.

Every Sunday morning my mother would take us to Woodland Avenue. (At that time the Swedish Baptist Church was there; it is now known as Evangel Baptist Church) When we first started to go there during Sunday school they always had contests to promote interest. Every time there were awards given there was "Grandma Hannah" (my mother) on the platform

with all of her children. That made her very happy. We could hardly afford a preacher, let alone a janitor and secretary like what we have today. The members of the congregation would each take a month and take turns cleaning the church. "Grandma Hannah" would always be the very first to raise her hand. Her hand would be raised to take the very first month. Always it would be in the height of the winter because she wanted to be first. Every Saturday morning you would see us going down Market Street with a broom and a bucket. We kept that place cleaner than I think we did our own home. Everything had to be dusted. It also meant that the person who was responsible for cleaning the church that month had to open it for prayer meetings, choir practice, and then three times on Sunday because they had a youth program at 5:00.

Speaking about the youth program, it was done mostly because a lot of the Swedish girls worked as housemaids on the north side and had no place to go on Sunday afternoons. The churches had what they called a 5:00 Young People's meeting. They would have a lovely program and then they would serve a lunch. Then everyone would stay for evening service.

We always teased my mother; she belonged to every organization in the church except the men's glee club. Why she couldn't carry a tune in a bucket, but still she sang. You could understand her singing too, because she sang from the heart. That's how we got started going to Evangel Baptist, and I've been going there ever since.

G: Perhaps you can give me some of your reminiscences of Sunday school growing up as a young person? How old were you when you started?

H: Four years old.

G: Maybe you can elaborate on this Baptist Young People's group, some of the things that you did.

H: For years our superintendent was John Peterson. Following him was John Larson. It seemed that unless you had the name John you couldn't be elected (although I was superintendent for a couple of years later). Sunday school then, we all met in one opening session. We had to do things with our hands since our monetary resources weren't great. We wanted an organ; we had an old pump organ that poor Jody had to pump. We wanted to have an electric one, so we got the bright idea to have a penny march to pay for the organ. It was a wonderful way to disband the opening session. Invariably the song we would sing every Sunday morning was "Living for Jesus". We sang all four verses. We got to know that

one pretty good. Then we would have our penny march; everyone would drop in a penny or whatever change they had. Surprisingly, in no time we had enough to pay for our organ. Another nice thing we had was a birthday bank. People would come up and drop their pennies in. That money went to help Klingberg's Children's Home. It isn't so much how much you give; if you give it consistently, it grows. We at no time could give any great sum to the Klingberg's Home, but by dropping our pennies every Sunday morning, it added up. We didn't have too much help from the home office either; today they plan everything for you, what you're to do. You did everything on your own then. We didn't have a lot of textbooks; we had the Bible. We had a little leaflet that helped us read the lesson, but we studied from the Bible.

Frank Dahlberg was president of Young People's. He would be up on the platform leading the meeting and then he would be down in the kitchen making the coffee. The kids in those days did for themselves; they didn't have people doing things for them all of the time. We learned to work together.

Then we had an organization that was for the young girls, like today we have the GMG. We were know as WWG--worthwhile girls working with God for the whole world's good. Our WWG girls belonged to the Trumbull American Baptist Association for Youth. More than once it was due to the sincerity of our own Anna Marie Gustafson who was on the advisory board there, that kept our youth group together. She had charge of devotion and spiritual life. They always wondered how our kids did so much better than their's. It was because we had that background. I remember sometimes that we would get up there and put on a program that was better than any preacher, but we had to do it ourselves.

I was president of GMG for twenty-five years. Jody Shogren and Ethel Dahlberg were our counselors. They were right there with us all the way. There again, we planned our own programs.

- G: You mentioned how you raised money. What were some of the other ways that the church raised money for support of the church?
- H: We had suppers. On Thanksgiving night everybody gave a day's wages over and above their regular giving. The ladies aid was the backbone of the church; they were always doing something to raise a little money.

Swedes celebrate midsummer, and that's in June. So in June they would go out in the country and bring in branches and

decorate the whole church. When you walked in the young ladies were dressed in their Swedish costumes. They would serve coffee, coffee bread and cookies, and take up an offering.

G: Do you remember anything about lawn fetes?

H: Oh yes! We bought the church property at the corner of Warren Court and Warren Avenue; that's where the parsonage was. We had this big, corner lot. (We thought we were going to build a church on it some day) We used it for a parking lot--whenever there were football games at South High we charged twenty-five cents for parking. So we would make a little there.

G: Maybe you could mention something about Camp Linwood Park in Vermilion, Ohio.

H: We started going to Linwood by going on Labor Day. Even during the war some of us went up there anyhow. I've been going to Linwood for fifty years or more; I still go. It is so peaceful. On Friday nights we would parade through the park singing because we would have concerts on Saturday nights and this was a way to advertise. Linwood has now been taken over by the Methodists and is still a religious camp.

G: Maybe you can give some recollections of events that took place at the church, such as conventions, these types of things.

H: Our July fourth picnic you couldn't reserve a pavilion so a bunch of us would have to go down the night before and sleep. This would be at Bears Den. Our mothers would pack bushel baskets of food. There were no tables. We spread tablecloths on the ground. One thing, the Sunday school always treated to ice cream. Each teacher would get her class and set them in a circle and treat them to ice cream.

We never had a large choir. Twelve would be a good number. Jody played the organ and directed. Evelyn Landers helped her a lot too. At that time you were allowed to join the choir when you were about thirteen. It was the same way working in Sunday school. I think I started working there when I was thirteen. I've worked in the Sunday school and choir over thirty-five years. To me, singing in the choir is a real form of relaxation. We've had wonderful evangelistic meetings, and always the first week in January was a week of prayer. Different ones would open up their home the whole week.

G: Can you talk about communication with the other churches in the area?

H: We were down on Woodland Avenue at Market. The First Covenant Church was at the northwest corner of Woodland and Market. Bethel Lutheran was just around the corner on Ridge Avenue. Our church and Covenant were together a lot and once a month three churches would get together in some form. During the summer, for vacation, the Baptist preacher would confer with the First Covenant preacher and they wouldn't take their vacations at the same time because their church would come to our church in the morning and then we would go to their's in the evening. The next Sunday would be the opposite. The fellowship was just wonderful. That brought into being the Swedish Central Society, which is another organization that is really like a community chest for the Scandinavian people. Still in existence, they only collect from Scandinavians (mostly members from all three churches) and only help Scandinavians.

At one time we owned property at the corner of Vermont and Howard. In fact, we were so sure of building there we even changed our name to Vermont Baptist Church, but that didn't materialize; that door closed.

G: Do you remember Swedish still being spoken?

H: Yes. That's how I learned my Swedish. Singing in the choir, Sunday school classes were done in Swedish, as well as all sermons.

G: When did this change?

H: It just gradually dropped to two Swedish sermons a month, and then maybe one Sunday a month. Always Wednesday night prayer meetings were in Swedish. One thing about prayer meetings, you were really on your knees.

I remember one time John Peterson (an elderly gentleman) had shaved his head. Nobody had seen him yet and he had a little, black skullcap on. We were sitting in the prayer room; he was in the sanctuary and there was a door between us. He opened the door and stuck his head in first to look to see where he was going to sit. Then he put his hat on and even the preacher had to laugh.

We think that guitar music in churches is something new. They had that way back then. They even had a harp. Reverend Magnuson called these women the "String Beans" instead of the string band. They really sang from the heart. No rock and roll.

G: Do you remember anything about renovations that took place?

H: Ruth Johnson and I had been to Warren, Pennsylvania to a Young People's convention. We had been at the Warren Baptist Church in Warren and they had done some renovating. Ruth and I really got ideas. We started renovating from that by changing the "cellar" into a basement.

Our baptistry was under the platform. We had to clear the stage, roll up the carpet, pull up the floor. We had no rooms for people to undress or dress; we would have to put a wire across and have a green curtain hung on that.

G: When you were walking into the church, what did the church look like to you?

H: You came up the steps and there was a little porch and two doors would open. There was a little hall and on the left-hand side there was a banister and steps going down to the basement. This was at first, before we renovated. After the renovation was done that banister was taken away and the stairway was moved into the next room. We put the rooms upstairs and that gave us a lot more room out in the hall to visit. Then we had push doors on the right and there were about three benches. On the left-hand side up to the aisle there were benches up to the front. There were also benches on the right-hand side. The platform was at the front with the piano on the left and the organ on the right. We had a green curtained banister going around it. Steps were going up on the organ side and steps going up on the piano side. When we had to heat with coal it was John Peterson's job to keep the furnace stoked. Invariably, it seemed if he didn't like the sermon you would hear him down there shaking the clinkers. Between the side room and the main church we had doors that pulled up and down. It was like an overflow room. We were able to entertain the Middle East Baptist Conference quite often.

G: Do you remember anything about the conventions that were held?

H: I was probably working in the kitchen.

G: Could you describe what the neighborhood looked like?

H: Right next door was the Frolund Building. The corner was rented by Leake's Drugstore, and then Gustafson's Grocery Store. In between they had a stairway going upstairs and they rented the apartments up there. The neighborhood was

beautiful. We were thrilled as kids when Senator Nils P. Johnson would come worship with us; he lived just across the street.

G: Do you have some personal impressions of ministers at the church?

H: When I first saw Reverend George Magnuson I thought he was "seedy", but he had the cutest smile. We met him at the train; he came in from Canada. Saturday night we had a reception for him at the church and I thought he surely would be dressed up; well, that was his best suit; he came in the same suit. But that didn't mean a thing. He was human. If he would come into your home he would come and sit in the kitchen; you wouldn't have to treat him in the dining room.

I can remember Reverend Gunnerfelt who used to come down as an evangelist from Cleveland. You could be crying and he would get you laughing, yet he would certainly put his message across. He was very outstanding.

Reverend Peterson's sermons were mostly in Swedish. Reverend Nordlander was a little more stern. Reverend Wickland didn't have much help from his wife, which was sad.

END OF INTERVIEW