

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Swedish Baptist Church

Church Life

O. H. 432

DAVID A. NELSON

Interviewed

by

Rich Gustafson

on

May 31, 1979

DAVID A. NELSON

Mr. David Nelson was born on February 6, 1895, in Cooper Township, Pennsylvania. Employed at various hardware stores, he worked at Stambaugh-Thompson from April 1914 to February 1952, Service Tool & Supply from March 1952 to October 1954, and at B. M. Clark Company from November 1954 until his retirement in February of 1960. Mr. Nelson served in the Army during World War I. He was married on January 1, 1921, and fathered two children: Marjorie and David Jr.

Mr. Nelson has been a member of the Swedish Baptist Church from February 1907, being the oldest active member. He has been an active member throughout most of these years, except during the Depression when his location on the south side of Youngstown (Boardman), mitigated against his attending the church. He has been on several boards during this time, the most important being the trustee and deacon board. He was an active participant in the construction of the church on Southern Boulevard in Boardman, supervising the workers and contributing valuable time to its maintenance.

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INTERVIEWEE: DAVID A. NELSON

INTERVIEWER: Rich Gustafson

SUBJECT: Church history, previous pastors, membership

DATE: May 31, 1979

G: This is an interview with David Nelson for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the Swedish Baptist Church, by Rich Gustafson, at 45 Romaine Avenue in Boardman, Ohio, on May 31, 1979, at 2:00 p.m.

Mr. Nelson, perhaps you could give me a short biographical sketch of your family and your relationship with the Evangel Baptist Church.

N: We came here from a little town in Pennsylvania in June of 1905. Of course, from then on I have attended, been baptized, and joined the church in 1907, and have been a continuous member since.

G: Maybe you could give me a short reminiscence of the period when you were growing up in the church?

N: There have been happy memories and some not so happy.

G: What is the size of the church at this time as far as membership when you first belonged?

N: I don't believe we had a hundred members in the church at that time. Reverend Peterson had come here in the summer of 1904, and from that time until 1911 we had taken in over one hundred members.

G: Maybe you could remember something about some of the ways the church raised money, the socials, the lawn fetes, these types of things. Do you remember some of these events?

- N: Every year we had a lawn fete on the church lots on the corner of Warren Avenue and Warren Court. They were sponsored mostly by the Young People's Society. The Ladies' Missionary Society had rummage sales mostly down on West Federal Street. They raised quite a bit of money.
- G: Can you describe the Sunday school picnics and these types of things that the church had, the July fourth picnics that they had, where these were held, and maybe how the members got to these affairs?
- N: In those days there were very few automobiles. The Sunday school picnics were always held down in Mill Creek Park over the hill from Lake Cohasset. Some of the younger members generally went out the night before and set up a tent so that we would have a place reserved for the Fourth of July picnic. We met there quite a few years. It was always a happy occasion. We played all kinds of games and played baseball in a wheat field. We had races which I think I won about every year. I learned to run because I was small and couldn't fight. I was always the smallest of the bunch. We used to have a communal table; people would bring food and set it on the table. That was a smorgasbord. We had it that way for a good many years until families began to separate and eat by family.
- G: Was there much contact with other churches there when you were on Woodland Avenue? Were there socials together?
- N: Yes. For the first few years there wasn't much interchange, but later when Bethel moved from Hazelton to Ridge Avenue the ladies used to get together about once a year. We had combined meetings with the old Swedish Mission Church, which is now the First Covenant, quite often. Our church didn't hold many people, so on our fortieth anniversary especially, the Mission Church allowed us to use their church on the Sunday afternoon for the big meeting and also for the annual anniversary banquet. We used to hold Good Friday meetings together, one year in the Mission Church and one year in our own. We met that way for a good number of years, even after we moved out on Southern Boulevard and the Covenant Church moved out on Glenwood Avenue.
- G: Maybe you could describe what a typical Sunday was for you growing up at the church: When you went to church, your Sunday school class, and the events of a typical Sunday for you associated around the church.
- N: We had Sunday school in the morning and right after that the morning service. One Sunday in the afternoon our teacher took our class out to Mill Creek Park and we did some swimming

out there and had a little picnic. Other times Sunday afternoons were just a case of walking through Mill Creek Park; we never got tired of that.

G: Do you remember anything about the camping program that the church had? In the early periods they really didn't have their own camping program. Can you describe something about the camping program that they had, the meetings that they would have in the summer, and what they did in this regard?

N: Every year they would have a camping period. We didn't have any camp of our own at that time. They used to go up to Linwood on Lake Erie for a week. They also went up to Findlay Lake in New York State for a few times. One year they went up to Chautauqua Lake. Finally, Leonard Ericson of Cleveland had a farm on Butternut Road in Burton, Ohio. He deeded it to the Middle East Conference. They held meetings up there all through the summer for the young people. Then the churches would get together and go up on Labor Day and have a picnic.

G: Do you remember something about the young people's groups that the church had that you belonged to, something about the youth choir that they had?

N: I was too young at first to belong to Young People. We didn't have anything for the younger ones either. The youth choirs didn't start until years later. When I did join the Young People we used to go to different towns to churches that belonged to the Middle East Conference. We also started a male chorus and were invited to different churches. We hired a bus from the Pennsylvania Ohio Power and Light to take us. We went to Erie; we were at an annual conference at Jamestown and sang in Chautauqua. We went to McKeesport, Akron, Canton. That was a real enjoyable time. That male chorus stayed together two or three years before it disbanded.

G: When the church was first organized it belonged to the Trumbull Association, I believe?

N: Yes, of the North American Baptist Convention. We belonged to that until shortly after the Baptist General Conference was formed. We resigned from the Trumbull Baptist Association and naturally joined the general conference.

G: This occurred when Reverend Magnuson came here. There were actually formal ties that were made with the Baptist General Conference. Do you remember anything about this? Was there any dissention at all about separating with the Trumbull Association and going with the Baptist General Conference?

- N: No. I don't remember any dissention or discussion. Of course, we enjoyed belonging to the Trumbull Baptist Young People. We met regularly with them, but when the Baptist Conference started we left the Trumbull Association because we felt that we shouldn't belong to two associations. Then we had our annual Middle East Baptist Conferences in the different cities of the Middle East. We used to enjoy going to them.
- G: Do you remember anything that was especially done at these conferences? You mentioned the fortieth was held at Evangel. Do you remember anything that was especially done at this time?
- N: Before we took up the English meeting in the early 1920's it was all in Swedish. We had Pastor Hammerburg of McKeesport, Dr. H. C. Wingblade who<sup>c</sup> was president of Bethel at the time. There were numerous missionaries or evangelists that used to come. We would hold meetings about once a year. Reverend Freeman, Reverend Oscar Gunnerfelt, who was pastor of Cleveland church for several years, used to come down. In the earlier days there was Pastor Olander.
- G: Maybe you could tell me something about your reminiscences of the ministries of particular pastors at Evangel. Maybe we could start with Reverend Peterson. Could you describe his work at the church, how long he was there, and your memories of this man at the Swedish Baptist Church?
- N: He came in 1904 for his pastorate and was here until 1911. Then there was a Reverend A. J. Linde who was here from October of 1911 until April of 1913. Then Pastor Peterson came back again and was with us as our leader until 1921 when Pastor C. A. Wickland came. Then we had some interim pastors until Reverend Kahlman came here as an evangelist. After he had been here we called him to be our pastor. He was only here about two years and then Pastor Norlander followed him. Then we had the evangelist David Nygren come for meetings. He was called to be our pastor and stayed for a number of years during the Depression. Then Pastor George Magnuson came and was here until 1943. After we moved out to Boardman the following pastors served as our leaders: Pastor Ben Sherman came in 1950; Pastor Kenneth Kolmodin in 1956; Pastor Arthur E. H. Barber in 1963; Pastor Richard C. Olson came in 1970 and is still serving as our leader.
- G: Could you describe some of your experiences during this time of the Depression, what the church maybe did, how the Depression affected the church, and how the church went through this experience?

N: During the Depression I didn't get to church too much because we had moved out to Boardman district. Not having a car when we did go to church I was taking the old Youngstown Southern streetcar. The church had sort of a hard time during the Depression. During Norlander's pastorate he got the church to buy four lots on the corner of Howard and Vermont Avenues. He was going to build a church and had the church name changed to Vermont Avenue Baptist Church. Of course, nothing ever came of that and they finally sold the lots for next to nothing. I was financial secretary of the church and sometimes it was really hard to scrape up enough money to pay the pastor and pay the bills. If we had a \$400 month we thought we were doing well.

G: Maybe you have some memories of the church itself, what it looked like at this time, the neighborhood. Maybe you could describe what the neighborhood looked like, where the church was centered down on Woodland Avenue?

N: As far as the neighborhood went there were many different nationalities that lived around the church. Nearly everyone in the earlier days walked. Some even walked from Ellenwood Avenue, which was about the last street in the city. Some of them that lived further out lived on the Park and Falls line; they used to take the streetcar. As far as we were concerned, we never lived more than half a mile from the church.

Later on as automobiles came in, people moved out further; the neighborhood changed and we really outgrew the old cement block church on Woodland Avenue and moved out to Boardman. The first meeting was held on June 18, 1950. The next morning daily vacation bible school started. That was the first daily vacation bible school we had. We didn't have any down at the old church. We had the church shell built, but only finished the basement for three or four years. We met in the basement. The cornerstone was laid in the latter part of October. The coldest day in December we hadn't gotten many windows because Truscon Steel was on strike. The contractor rigged up tarpaulins and old windows and tried to close it up. He had arranged for the cement company to deliver the cement and it was only ten below zero. In those days they didn't know about adding things to cement to help it. The cement froze. He tried every way to get it to dry. Finally, after it did dry, every time we had a meeting we had to sweep up and get a wheelbarrow full of dust before we got together and laid the tile. It was a great time.

- G: The main reason that the church was moved from Woodland Avenue to Southern Boulevard was the size?
- N: Yes. Space was limited. The church lot was probably twenty feet across in front besides the church. The depth couldn't have been twenty five feet. We put on a couple of rooms in back of the church. That was on Frolund's property.
- G: Do you remember anything about physical improvements that were made to the church on Woodland Avenue?
- N: Yes. That was done during the Depression. They dug out parts of the basement that hadn't been dug out before and made a more pleasant social hall and put in a new kitchen and new restrooms. I didn't have anything to do with that because we were living out in Boardman at the time. Quite a few of the members put in a good number of hours.
- G: Maybe you could just give me a few of your reminiscences of the different types of programs that they had, perhaps the Christmas program that they had in the church during the time that you remember at Woodland Avenue? Also, tell of Fourth of July programs.
- N: July fourth celebrations were always picnics at Mill Creek Park. At Christmas there was always a pleasant program from the youngsters to the older people. The young people put on skits of the life of Christ. Mostly it was a joy to watch the younger children. In those days it was pretty hard to get the youngsters to sing out so you could hear them, which we have no trouble within our present church. As far as Sunday school went, most of the classes had to meet in the different corners of the main sanctuary. One of the improvements they had made during the time that they rebuilt the basement was when we put electric lights in instead of gas. I went up into the room above the Sunday school room and found out that the ceiling there was really high and there was easy room for two Sunday school rooms. I told two of the trustees about it and they finally put stairs up there and put in two Sunday school rooms where the primary and beginners classes met.
- G: When did the church switch over from speaking Swedish in sermons and singing Swedish songs and this?
- N: At first the young people got the church to allow one English meeting a month. It was in the 1920's, I don't remember quite when. It finally switched over to English all together. I know that there was quite a discussion at that time at the business meetings about what were we going to do with the people that come over from Sweden that don't understand English.



They would go over to the Covenant Church or Bethel Church. It turned out that a lot of them went to the Covenant Church because they had English; they wanted to learn the English language. We still had a Swedish bible class, even after we moved out to Boardman. John Peterson had taught that for years. He had been the first Sunday school superintendent and he also filled in for Pastor Westerborg when he was called around 1901; he was missionary to the Swedish people in what was known as the American Baptist Convention. They allowed him to serve six months on the mission field. During that time John Peterson took charge of the meetings. He was very versatile.

G: Maybe you can discuss the composition of some of the church boards. Do some other people stick out in your mind as being very important to the church?

N: My dad was financial secretary for quite a few years. Then there was Elmer Gustafson; he was treasurer for over twenty years. He was also chairman of the trustee board. When I was secretary, Ed Shogren was chairman of the trustees. We had John Larson who was vice-chairman of the church and chairman of the deacon board, and also Sunday school superintendent for a number of years. Martin Hurtig was church secretary for quite a few years. He also wrote the first history of the church for the fiftieth anniversary. Bob Bauman was a deacon, trustee. I think I served every position but treasurer and chairman.

END OF INTERVIEW