

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Swedish Baptist Church

Church Life

O. H. 435

DONALD W. GUSTAVSON

Interviewed

by

Richard Gustafson

on

May 15, 1979

DONALD W. GUSTAVSON

Donald W. Gustavson was born on September 3, 1913 in Bessemer, Pennsylvania. A graduate of South High School in Youngstown, Mr. Gustavson was employed at Youngstown Sheet & Tube Corporation from 1934 to 1975, when he retired at the age of 62. He married Elsie Eliason on May 16, 1943. Gustavson was the father to three children: Marjorie, Juanita, and John. He currently resides at 461 Annawan Lane, Boardman.

Mr. Gustavson's family has played a very important role in the history of the Swedish Baptist Church. His grandfather was one of the original members who formed the church, and Donald has carried on the tradition of his ancestors. Serving in various capacities throughout his long relationship with the church, he has been trustee, deacon, and church custodian and assisted on different renovations which have taken place at the church. His wife has also been a key figure in the church, superintending the Sunday school program for many years. Donald and his wife served as interim workers overseas in the Philippines, after his retirement from Sheet & Tube.

Donald is a central figure in the early period of the church, providing good recollections of business arrangements carried out by the church. Special interests include wood-working and carpentry.

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INTERVIEWEE: DONALD GUSTAVSON
INTERVIEWER: Richard Gustafson
SUBJECT: Early Beginnings, Renovations and Construction,
Sunday School
DATE: May 15, 1979

RG: This is an interview with Donald Gustavson for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Rich Gustafson, at 461 Annawan Lane, on May 15, 1979, at 10:00 a.m.

Mr. Gustavson, perhaps you can give me a short biographical sketch of your family, your involvement in Evangel Baptist Church, just a few recollections of your childhood and family background.

DG: It dates back to 1918, that is when my folks moved to Youngstown from Bessemer, Pennsylvania. We've belonged to Evangel ever since. That had been our church; we've been very happy there and found a great blessing for attending.

RG: Perhaps you can give me some reminiscences of your childhood at Evangel, what it was like to be a young boy attending Evangel Baptist Church? Maybe you have some memories of your childhood at Evangel?

DG: Our childhood then was a little bit different than what is is now. We weren't as hurried then as things are now. I can remember going down to church; we would have to take the car and go down. It was about a twenty minute ride down to East Woodland Avenue where the church was located. For a while, there wasn't enough money to buy gasoline or a license so we took the streetcar down; that is something that the youngsters nowadays very seldom have the opportunity to ride.

RG: Do you remember something about the youth program at the church, maybe something about the size of the young people's group?

DG: Yes, the youth program then was nothing like what it is now. I can remember we called it the Young People's Society. That was an age group from eighth grade all the way up to a dear, old member called Grandma Hannah Johnson. Whenever there was a Young People's meeting she would be there. The age span was very great, but we enjoyed each other. We didn't have to have the elaborate setups and programs that I see being used now. Incidentally, when we first started it was in Swedish. A lot of our programs used the Swedish language. Of course, in the Young People's Society that was more or less just to entertain the older folks. We had a great thrill out of it being able to get up there and speak Swedish. A lot of us did a bit of stumbling, but we had fun.

RG: Do you remember the size of the church at this time, maybe how many members attended the morning worship service, and maybe something about the service itself?

DG: When you say members I would have to look in the records, but I think if we had thirty to forty that would be a fair average back then. On special occasions it would be more.

RG: Perhaps something you can bring up about the communication between other churches? I understand there were other Swedish churches, and the Covenant Church. Was there much comraderie between the churches as far as getting together for socials and this type of thing?

DG: Yes. At the very beginning there was a little bit of unfriendly competition, but then later on we had very good relations. In the summer time the Covenant Church and our church would go together. When the Covenant pastor would be on vacation our pastor would preach, and when our pastor went on vacation, the Covenant pastor would take care of the Sunday services. The Lutheran folks would come on occasion, so there were times when the three churches, the Lutheran, the Covenant, and Evangel would have programs together. The Swedish Central Society would give concerts. This was a group that was made up of the Swedish churches, plus the Swedish lodges. The primary reason for its existence was to help the needy people of Scandinavian descent.

RG: Was there much as far as helping these out? Was there a fund that was given to these people on their way over or provisions made for families?

DG: What was done in order to raise the money for this was

there would be a concert held; generally it was held in the Covenant Church because they had the largest sanctuary. There would be numbers from the different churches and lodges. Tickets were sold for this concert and proceeds would go into this fund for helping out the needy. These were families living here in the area.

RG: Do you remember anything about lawn fetes and how these were used to procure funds for the church?

DG: That was a method used in our own church. We used to have lawn fetes which we held on the old Warren Court property. It was alongside the parsonage. The ladies would bake cakes; ice cream was there, and pop. It was a means of making some money. Now we don't exactly think it was the thing to do, but back in those days it was a means of raising money.

RG: Your life at the time was pretty much centered around the church as far as on Sunday. Maybe you can think back and give what a typical day was for you on Sunday, where you went, what the services were like, and your reminiscences of this.

DG: This would be in the 1920's and mother would get us up in the morning and we would have breakfast. At that time we had an old Model T Ford; that was our transportation down to church. We would generally stop and pick up one or two folks on the way down to church. There would be Sunday school first. There were about three areas where the Sunday school classes were held. One was the auditorium; there would be several classes in there. That was generally the men's class, and there was a senior adult class. In the basement, as boys we were relegated to the furnace room. I can still see those tubs of ashes sitting down there and the furnace going. In the winter time, it would be very warm because the old gravity furnace would heat up the cellar more than what it did upstairs. Then after the Sunday school we had the morning service. Back at that time it would be Swedish. I was fortunate; I was able to understand Swedish. To me it was no problem, but it posed a problem to those who did not understand the language very well. Later on it had to be changed so that Swedish was just used on rare occasions, and then not at all in order to meet the requirement of the people attending. After church we would go home and have dinner. My parents looked dimly on going out and playing around on Sunday. I was the only child, so it was either sit on the porch and maybe have a ball and bounce it around a little bit, . . . but you stayed on the porch. That, incidentally, changed later on too. On some Sundays we would take a ride, if we had enough gas, to our old hometown of Bessemer, which was thirteen miles away, and visit my aunts, uncles, and cousins down there. Generally if we went down

we would have supper on the old Shogren farm; that was my grandmother and grandfather. We would come back in time for church, and that would be the Sunday activities.

- RG: You had some personal relations with Evangel Baptist Church. I understand that your uncle married the daughter of Reverend Peterson, if I'm not mistaken, so that you had quite a working relationship with the minister. Maybe you can give us a few impressions of Reverend Peterson, of maybe the different pastors at Evangel during the time that you remained there.
- DG: Reverend Peterson was with the church for two different terms. The first term I don't recall that well. The second, I remember Pastor S. J. Peterson as a wonderful Christian man. He had great compassion for people. The year of the flu he . . .
- RG: When was this?
- DG: As I recall that was the year we moved up here; that was 1918. We had been here just a few weeks and first my mother got sick and then I think I got sick and then dad got sick. Then my aunt came up from Bessemer to take care of us and she got sick. In the meantime, Reverend Peterson was going around and visiting the people. He would pitch in and do things that needed to be done. He did this with all of the members of the church. When they were really sick they would take the people down to South High School. That was sort of an auxiliary hospital. What that man did was really remarkable.
- RG: Do you remember anything about the movement towards the Middle East Baptist Conference at this time when Reverend G. Magnuson was pastor?
- DG: We have always been affiliated with the Middle East Baptist Conference.
- RG: Perhaps you can give me something about the Sunday school at this time? Was the Sunday school held in separate classes, or did the Sunday school meet together? Tell something about the class that you belonged to also.
- DG: We would have what were known as opening exercises. The Sunday school would meet in the auditorium and then would go into the various classes. I always remember the primary class, my aunt, Jody Shogren, was the teacher there; she was the daughter of Reverend Peterson. She had that primary class; those were kids from the time they were able to walk until they were in second or third grade. They would go in a little room in the back of the church. Then the other classes, the Baracca class and Philathea class would go in

various areas of the auditorium. The older folks went in what was known as a side room. We boys were in the furnace room, and there were some who were in the kitchen, and some in the dining room.

- RG: Do you remember anything about conventions that were held at the church during your time soon after Magnuson came? Do you remember these events?
- DG: The Middle East Baptist Convention met in our church on various occasions. It was sort of a rotation: we took our turn with the other churches. It was a very interesting time when it would be held. We would meet friends from there, and from the other churches also. Their pastors would have part in the program and then generally we would bring someone from headquarters as the main speaker.
- RG: If you were describing the physical arrangements of the church as you went into the auditorium at the Woodland church, maybe you can give us some description as to the size.
- DG: The seating capacity, I would presume, was about one hundred. You would come in on the side of the church towards the rear. I can remember the oak pews; they were pretty well scuffed up from years of service. The platform was elevated and it had two, round pillars on either side with grill work running between these pillars and the outer wall. The organ was on the right side of the platform, the piano on the left, and the pulpit sitting in the center, of course. Then when we had baptismal services the baptistry was immediately below the floor of the platform. The floor was raised up on a series of hinges and there were 2x4 braces that were down under there. It was quite a thing when they would raise the floor of the platform to have the baptismal service. I can remember, the wooden tank that was lined with sheet iron. It would be constantly breaking; the solder joints would break loose and the water would be leaking down into the basement. On Sundays, when there was going to be a baptismal service, there would be tubs sitting down in the basement kitchen for this water that was dripping down. The heating system for the water was very poor; sometimes in the winter time the water would be mighty cold. As far as for changing clothes, I remember it was very awkward. There were a couple rooms in the back of the church we used for a while, but then those rooms had to be taken down because it was discovered they had been built on somebody else's property. When we had baptismal service then the folks had to have a wrap put around them and they had to go off down from the front of the church over to the side room to change clothes.
- RG: Do you remember something about physical improvements that were made at the church as far as improving the basement of the church?

DG: That was one of the things that I will never forget. That was done during the Depression years. The engineer of the project was Egnar Johnson; he was a man who would look at something and could see just what needed to be done. He worked on the railroad, but he was a fellow that was really a mechanic.

I remember that we decided that we should put a blower on the furnace that we had; we had a gravity heat furnace. In order to do this we had to change the pipes, but they were large, round pipes that took up so much room. As you walked in the basement of the church just the average size person would hit his head. He came up with the idea of making rectangular pipes out of these same round pipes. He got ahold of a timber that was similar to a railroad tie and we put that in the center of the section and with hammers just beat the round pipe into a rectangular pipe. That made for more head clearance, and then he covered it with asbestos paper again. We got the blower at Sears Roebuck and hooked that up. I can still see the mercury control. It sure improved the heating system. At the same time there were doors between what was known as the side room and the auditorium. They were full-length doors and they were heavy things. When they were lowered it would cut the downstairs in half. They came down into the basement and made a wall down there that would interfere. John Peterson came up with the idea to cut those doors in half so that when it was lowered you only lowered it from the top half, but then that didn't interfere with the basement. It was a big improvement.

They also, at the same time, remodeled the attic that was never used before and made two rooms up there.

RG: This was during the Depression. How did this affect you personally and maybe something that the church did during the Depression that sticks out in your mind? How did the Depression affect your family in particular?

DG: At the time we thought things were mighty rough and they were very inconvenient. After, it was a means of drawing us together I would say. We had to make do with what we had. I find that you get a greater enjoyment out of simple things than you do out of elaborate things that we have nowadays. I think that in my own life it was a good thing that I went through it because I've been able to enjoy the many things that we have now. The kids nowadays always have everything they want.

RG: Tell me something in particular about the church, something that the church did that sticks out in your mind?

DG: I can't remember any definite thing, but I now that when there was someone that needed a sweater or a coat, we could

generally find out someplace among the members. When kids needed shoes they found means of getting them for them. Here again, the Central Society was able to do a good bit, although its finances were strained at the time. It seemed as though it was able to get things going.

- RG: Do you remember anything about the procedure from moving to the Woodland church to the new acquisition of property? Do you remember something about this movement in the church, why it was motivated, why they felt it was needed?
- DG: The location on East Woodland became so far away from where the majority of the people lived. Most of the people moved south. When the church was built there that was the center of the Swedish locaiton. As Youngstown became industrialized that area became less desirable for living areas, so folks moved out leaving the center of the city. We had property on Warren Court; that is where we had those lawn fetes, but that wasn't sufficient. That was just a matter of two lots and that wasn't large enough to do anything with. We purchased property on Vermont Avenue then and were all ready to build there when the Depression hit. After the Depression was over, then it was decided that wasn't the right place. There again, the property was too small. The property out on Stanton Avenue opened up and we purchased the lots there. We built there and found that we were able to buy some lots on the side of the church, which we did, and which we were thankful that we were able to get.
- RG: Maybe you have some memories too of what the neighborhood looked like on Woodland Avenue. If you were describing it to somebody as you walk down towards the church, maybe the configuration of the streets and where it was situated and what the neighborhood looked like, can you tell that?
- DG: It was located on East Woodland Avenue. Directly on one side was a large, wooden structure; I don't remember if it was two or three stories high. It was Park Apartments and the store eight next to the church used to belong to Adolph Gustafson, who had a Swedish grocery store. I can still see that old type grocery store. When you entered it had a smell all its own; it was a good smell. On the corner of Woodland and Market was a drugstore, Lake's Drugstore. Going up the direction there was a large home that had large, white pillars on it. It had green shingles on the gable; it was a two and a half story home. It had been a fine home.
- RG: You mentioned a bit about the center of the city. Maybe you can elaborate on what the Youngstown diamond looked like?
- DG: On the diamond was a statue of a man. Market Street entered from the south, made a half circle around the diamond and continued north as Wick Avenue. Federal Street went east

and west through the diamond. At first it was just a grassy area, and then they built a branch library on the north half of the diamond; that was there for a good many years. For the Christmas celebration they would put up a large community Christmas tree. Later on it became known as the square. The streetcar tracks would make a complete circle; that was where some of the cars would reach the end of the line.

END OF INTERVIEW