

## Mount Hope Church

Fifty years ago a person seeking the location of Mount Hope Church would have been told, "Why, yes, stranger, Mount Hope Methodist Church is in Bennington Township. It's seven miles straight north by east, 'as the crow flies', from the east end of Fourth Street bridge in Waterloo. Most of the farms are fenced, so you can't follow the old trail. Makes it a little farther by road; they call it eight miles."

How much that name, Mount Hope, means to dozens of people scattered the length and breadth of America — lawyers, doctors, merchants, farmers, musicians, writers, public speakers! In the days of their youth it was the spiritual center of the neighborhood. Established by the faith, work, and coöperation of those pioneer fathers, it became the embodiment of the community character and ideals. Mount Hope Church served not only as a place of worship, but as a social and intellectual center as well. The cultural influence of that country meeting-house has had an abiding effect even to the third generation.

That a church would be established in the community was inevitable. The religious nature of most of the early settlers in Bennington Township was assurance of that. Services were held in a schoolhouse



whenever a preacher could be obtained, and Sunday school was maintained regularly. It was not until 1881, however, just a half century ago, that the project of building a church was undertaken. The story of that enterprise is vividly told in the diary of William A. Wilson.

The winter months of 1881, according to the record in Mr. Wilson's diary, seem to have been very cold and the snow fall was unusually heavy. The sleighing was good. Rails came down from the fences and bob-sleds and cutters glided merrily across fields and meadows to Waterloo and elsewhere. In some places the snow drifted so deep that vehicles could pass directly over the fences on the icy surface. But the severe weather seems not to have interfered seriously with social and religious activities.

On January 9, 1881, the thermometer stood at 30° below zero, yet the record in the old diary declared that the "Children went to north school to Sabbath school and meeting". One week later the record was the same — "30° below zero. Children went to north school to Sabbath school and meeting". It is clear that the "north school" was the center of religious and social activity of the community. "February 7, Big banks of snow. Snowed and blowed all night. Scooped snow".

Meanwhile, despite stormy weather, plans for building a church went forward. The ever increasing con-



gregation, inspired by the energy and ambition of the young minister, Rev. DeWitt Clinton, demanded more room. Under the leadership of Mrs. L. D. Rolph the Sabbath school grew apace. Everybody seemed to be enthusiastic.

On March 26th, W. A. Wilson's diary reads, "Mr. W. H. Palmer here to see about building a new M. E. Church. Thawing some. Robbins returning." Spring was in the air. There was work to be done. March 29th: "Went to a meeting at Faulkner's School to see about building church". Apparently the question was decided in the affirmative, for two days later Mr. Wilson "went around with subscription paper for building the new church." The next day, April 1st, "Mr. and Mrs. Palmer spent the day with us", to discuss the business of the church. From a record now old and yellow, in Mr. Palmer's handwriting the success of his "Subscribers' List" is given:

Mr. J. M. Bennet . . .	\$30.00	Boise & Couch . . . .	\$ 5.00
Mrs. C. A. Miller . .	30.00	H. Williams . . . . .	1.00
M. H. Moore & Co. .	20.00	J. K. Stanley . . . . .	2.00
Joe King . . . . .	50.00	Balliet & Weld . . . .	2.00
W. Snowden . . . . .	10.00	W. Hicks . . . . .	10.00
G. Snowden . . . . .	5.00	O. F. Miller . . . . .	5.00
Mrs. Shaulis . . . . .	1.00	G. W. Thurston . . . .	5.00
I. M. Hazel . . . . .	5.00	Wm. A. Wilson . . . .	100.00
B. Stewart . . . . .	5.00	Wm. H. Palmer . . . .	100.00
Mrs. Frank . . . . .	5.00	Mr. Joe King later pledged	
		\$50 more.	



Mr. Wilson spent all day Wednesday, April 6th with W. H. Palmer discussing plans for building the church. Two days later, "A meeting was held at the home of Mr. Gookins," for the purpose of organizing the business administration of the new church. Rev. Clinton was in the neighborhood in the interests of the church. Because of their larger contributions, Mr. Palmer, Mr. Wilson, and Mr. King were named the first trustees and building committee. The diary record reads: "Church incorporating. Now ready for business." The signers of the articles of incorporation, besides the trustees, were D. S. Gookins, Jacob Ennis, Joseph Thompson, Charles McGinley, W. H. Graham, Charles Gibbs, N. B. Choate, John Farman, John Briden, and W. W. Hunter.

Soon afterward Joseph Schenk "donated a small corner of ground for the church". Then on Tuesday, May 31st, "Men commenced blasting stone on my farm for the church on the corner". B. A. Wilson hauled the first load of stone to the spot where community interest centered as building operations began. "Grandpa Funk built the foundation." The carpenters in charge were Mr. Bretnell and his son who had just come from England a short time before. They donated a share of their labor, for as soon as the framework was up they were given the privilege of living in the church and boarding themselves. All this time they were assisted by those interested who could "lend



a hand" to aid in any way. Chris Schenk did the plastering. George Ellis built the chimney, the brick having been burned in a kiln at Blakesville. Only once in the fifty years since it was built has that chimney been repaired.

By autumn the church was finished. On November 8, 1881, "Adelbert [B. A. Wilson] and Charles Choate went to town to buy oysters for a festival in the new church". That evening the young people went to the "oyster supper at the church". And thus was established the new church as a social center. On November 23rd, in spite of a "cold north wind", the edifice was given a good cleaning. Windows were washed and everything made ready for the dedication. Mr. Wilson's day book says, "Cold north wind. Girls helped clean new church". There was much hurrying about on the part of the ladies. No doubt the statement on December 1st that "Mary and Adelbert went to town. Mary bought new dolmans" is an indication of what others were doing. Two days later in the evening of December 3rd a meeting was held at the church and final preparations made for the services on the morrow.

Up to this time open weather had prevailed. Indian summer had made a beautiful day for the last Sabbath school and meeting day at the old north schoolhouse on November 27th, which had been the home of this congregation for nearly ten years. Sun-



day, December 4th, was a pleasant day. Mr. Wilson's diary says, "Went to church in new church. It was dedicated. House was full. Tonight all gone to church but me and Elsie and the baby [Perle]. *Long may it [the church] stand and be a blessing to the community is My desire.*" December 11th: "Children gone to Sabbath school in new church."

Was it the end of labor, the completion of the building? No. On December 19th, Mr. Wilson "set posts and hitching frames at church". Also on this day, "J. P. King, Waterloo photographer, took the first picture of the church." The name, Mount Hope Church, was suggested by Mr. Wilson in memory of a small mountain "back in the Yadkin Valley" in North Carolina. Moreover, Mr. and Mrs. N. B. Choate had come from Port Hope, Canada. Since the church was a veritable "mountain of hope" to the neighborhood, the name had a symbolical implication that appealed to all.

The dedication of Mount Hope Church was a memorable occasion, not the least significant feature being the unusual circumstance of freedom from indebtedness. Events of that day are still cherished recollections and each family has its own stories. An incident which must have amused those in attendance and mortified one of the first trustees occurred toward the end of the morning service. A little four-and-a-half-year-old girl had been promised that she should



go to the church in the afternoon. When the meeting extended long past the customary closing time, she became weary of waiting. Taking things into her own hands, she slipped away from her hired caretaker, "Tammer", secured her best shoes, wrapped herself in a heavy shawl which hid her calico dress, for her good clothes hung too high on hooks above her head, and thus arrayed Asenath trudged to her haven, the new church.

Of the actual dedication service the record is quite matter of fact. Rev. J. W. Clinton assisted his son, the pastor, Rev. DeWitt Clinton. Miss Belle Clinton, sister of the pastor, was the organist, playing without a hymn book, for this important article had been overlooked. Two organs for the occasion had been loaned by Waterloo music dealers. Miss Emma I. Wilson became the first official organist.

On January 13, 1882, a "New England Supper", was held to raise money for the "organ fund and other necessary things", including "new overshoes and a new overcoat for the young minister". A penciled record shows that on one occasion "Mr. Clinton walked from the Gibbs farm where he boarded to the church through bitter cold and across the fields on the snow-banks over the fence tops". His need of warm clothing must have been quite as imperative as a church organ. The supper itself seems to have been fully as successful in a culinary and social way as it was



financially. The bill-of-fare was chicken pie, baked beans, and brown bread, a typical Boston Saturday-night supper.

Some of the costumes worn at this gala affair may well be mentioned. A chronicler says, "Isaac Whitney with powdered wig, and Mary Wilson as George and Martha Washington, were a decided success. W. H. Palmer wore a suit he had brought with him from England. Knee britches, long stockings, slipper with silver buckles, a ruffled shirt and a waistcoat, with a three cornered hat. Miss Lottie Choate wore a dress of twenty years or more before which belonged to her mother, Mrs. N. B. Choate. Miss Edith Betts came as a sweet and charming bride." W. A. Wilson wore his wedding suit with its brocaded satin vest and Mrs. Wilson, her white silk, hand-knotted fringed, wedding shawl, bought in Dubuque in 1857 when Mr. Wilson was a pioneer merchant at Algona.

Weeks went by and then the first sorrow came to the little white church. It was the funeral of William Lawrence Wilson on May 9, 1882. Burial was in Fairview Cemetery, a place where those who know can read on many a tombstone names of Mount Hope's honored dead. Only four funerals have been held in this church, and no wedding has ever been celebrated there.

As the years have slipped away the little church has become a community shrine. There the devotion,



the joy, the sorrow, and the pleasures of the neighborhood have centered. Ministers have come and gone, and each has left the imprint of his character upon the congregation. Yet perhaps none has been more faithful or influential than the first beloved pastor.

In this fiftieth anniversary the setting sun may still fall upon a silver lamp reflector, as a stray ray of light filters through the unshuttered windows. The old walnut cottage organ, the communion rail, and the great horsehair-covered chairs on the rostrum are gone, but the old Bible is still there on the folding table. The old air-tight wood stoves for which W. A. Wilson used to "carry an armful of wood to start the fire so it would get warmed up quick" have been replaced by a furnace in the basement. Are the walls still hung with rare tapestries — the ropes of white and red clover and evergreens, wreaths of roses, crosses of lilies, and bouquets of lavender and white lilacs and iris that festooned the walls on Children's Day? Tapestries of memory. Perhaps they can be seen by following the *Shining Road* that leads from home to the ever open door of old Mount Hope Church.

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