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Reflection on Family Ties to Denominational History

BY CHRISTY MESAROS-WINCKLES, EDITOR

Last spring I published a call for people to share their family histories with the Marston Memorial Historical Center. Too often we think our family stories are insignificant when in reality they are intrinsically connected to understanding a larger historical narrative, such as the history of the Free Methodist Church.

Soon after that issue was published I received a call from Harry Bonney, retired pastor and former Southern Michigan Superintendent, with an amazing family story to tell. With roots in South Dakota, the Bonney's family Free Methodist history run deep, especially to the now closed Wessington Springs Junior College. The family saved their diaries, letters, photos and other documents for several generations. So of course I jumped at the chance to publish such an amazing family narrative. If you enjoy the printed version of Harry's story, check out the online version (<http://fmchr.ch/Salt-Light>) for more exciting stories!

Even more rewarding than the opportunity to publish a piece of living history was the chance to talk and visit with Harry himself. On a chilly day in early October my husband and I visited Harry at Arbor Manor in Spring Arbor, MI where he was recovering from heart surgery. Though now 89, Harry told us that he believed God had preserved him because He still had work for him to do in God's service. Andrew and I can only hope that when we reach that age we too can look back on a life of service to God and say, "what more can I do!" We also learned

that Harry is quite an accomplished poet with years of poems composed during his time in ministry.

As an archival scholar, I cannot tell you how important these types of family stories and poems are to my research. Without family stories I never would have completed my dissertation on Clara Wetherald, one of the first female delegates to General Conference in 1890, and Ida Gage, another early woman delegate to General Conference in 1894. These women were just names on the pages of the General Conference minutes and in the stories of the *General Conference Daily*. It was through finding their descendants, who had saved family records, that I pieced together the lives and ministries of these two amazing women.

As we look back on our rich denominational history and keep in mind the countless individuals who have shaped that narrative, let's now use those reflections to think about the next phase of Free Methodist history – including construction of new museum displays at the Marston Historical Center. Fundraising and planning are well underway, and you can truly make a huge difference by donating or (more importantly) sharing your stories and family history to be preserved for future generations of Free Methodists. As editor of the newsletter I'm always looking for ideas for future issues and family histories also play an important role in Marston Historical Center's archival collection. □

Salt & Light

BY GEORGE HARRY BONNEY

The 83 Year History of
Wessington Springs
Junior College

Once the Wessington Springs Seminary was established in 1887, its physical “roots” gripped the eastern slopes of Wessington Hills. Spiritually, its influence flourished in two ways. First, of course, it was absorbed by students who came to study and worship on campus. Second, the spiritual influence—off campus—spread like irrigating waters for miles around. Two families who came under this beneficent flow were the Ward family and the Bonney family. The seminary touched hundreds of prairie lives in a way reminiscent of the Church after Pentecost.

Early Connections

In 1884 George H. Bonney and his wife Lizzie left east central Iowa and settled in Dakota Territory. Their homestead was about forty miles east of Wessington Springs. Along with developing a productive farm, the couple welcomed two sons and six daughters into their home over the next few years. At some point the interests of the Bonney family and the ministry of WSS and the local Free Methodist congregation intersected. According to Alma Bonney Hallman’s “Reminiscences” (b.1893), “the day came when one by one we left home to attend Wessington Springs Seminary... [with] Mother’s encouraging pushes. We often attended the Free Methodist Quarterly meetings held in a school house near home. The influence of the Free Methodist Church and its college upon our lives cannot be estimated” (p. 30).

Free Methodist Activity in the Dakotas

More evidence of Free Methodist influence in Central South Dakota (emanating, no doubt, from Wessington Springs) appears in the lives of George and Linnie Ward—my maternal grandparents. In 1925 a local newspaper published Linnie’s obituary following her death in March. It states that “She was raised under Christian influence and during her early married life she, with her family, worshipped with the Free Methodists in the Hays school house. When the Pearl Church was built she united with that church in about 1897.”

A historic flashback story in “The Daily Republic” of Mitchell, S.D. for June 20, 1980, highlights another incursion of Free Methodist activities into the life of South Dakota communities: “In May of 1884 a few Christians in northeast Sanborn County [where I was raised]... organized a Sunday School... In the fall the people decided to build a sod church...[and] in 1885...the believers moved into the sod chapel.” My great-grandparents, Marshall and Arvilla Bonney, were almost certainly some of these “few Christians,” as my grandfather George Bonney records in his 1884 diary that he went that day to Sunday School.

The Loan

A further point of contact between my family and the seminary occurred when my grandfather, George H. Bonney,

loaned Wessington Springs Junior College (renamed in 1918) some money. This was likely done at one of the times of grave financial peril that beset the college. How much money did grandpa loan? Sister Faith Bonney Hubbard in her *Life and Times of Faith Bonney* declares, “Grandpa Bonney had loaned the college a large amount of money. Grandma Bonney was afraid the college would never be able to pay it back so she wanted it to



Back row: Siblings Jessie, Naomi, George, Faith and Brian
Front: Parents Clarence and Faith with brother Doane

be used as scholarships by her grandchildren.” Doane Bonney in his *The Bonney Family* states, “I had grown up with the idea that it amounted to about \$10,000,” and includes an accounting by Wilma Bonney Thomas showing that in 1939 there was \$6,600 owing from the college. It is likely that these scholarships were equitably distributed among the several Bonney cousins who attended Wessington Springs College. My family’s share was used by my older sisters Faith and Naomi.

However, the real influence of Wessington Springs Junior College (WSJC) cannot be measured in dollars or scholarships. A direct testimony to the spiritual vitality of Wessington Springs comes from Wilma Bonney Thomas’ memorial to my father Clarence in 1977. She relates that “In 1906 Clarence left home to attend the Free Methodist Academy at Wessington Springs... Clarence was always moral and upright... the first one of the family to ‘go away to school’... I shall never forget the impression made upon my mind and heart by a letter he wrote not long after entering the school taught by godly teachers. The letter has long since crumbled to dust but not so the words which he wrote. They were: ‘Dad and Mother, I want to you to know that I have received Christ as my personal Savior. He has forgiven all my sins and from now on, by His grace, I intend to let Him be Lord of my life’.”

My Story

Though my grandmother had ensured scholarship money would be available for myself and my siblings, scholarships never entered my head as I began to look at going to college. My walk with the Lord was wobbly. But one evening in November 1942 changed that. At a revival meeting in our one-room school building God spoke. I left knowing I was to be a minister of the gospel. So by January 1943 I was at WSJC enrolling to take my remaining high school unit and 12 college hours. Marvelous are God's ways!

Coming to the college mid-year was different. Registering for the academic side went well but the living quarters were unusual. I was assigned a small unused classroom on the second floor of the administrative building. The north location meant my leaky window was lashed by South Dakota's famous, frigid northwest winds. Winter nights alone in the big old building with its creakings and groanings were lonely.

My work assignment was also unusual—I was appointed the college's morning milkman—meaning I extracted milk from about four tolerant cows and carried it in a large covered milk can down to the cheery kitchen in time for breakfast. The pay scale was about fifteen cents an hour. Early on I also was hired to dig a major trench from President Harden's house to the road. It took hours in the heavy soil, but I dug and dug. In the end it was about twenty feet long, two feet wide and five feet deep. But I felt well paid when the President gave me \$23. Rich!

Another glimpse of how students worked at WSJC comes from my diary for January 19, 1944. A load of coal arrived in Wessington Springs by rail. The thirty-six tons had to be off loaded by hand into trucks and delivered into underground bunkers at the college. A crew of perhaps six students was rounded up. I was one. Around seven hours of heavy work ensued, relieved only by a hurried supper. Pay? Usually we worked for 15 to 25 cents an hour—applied to a school bill. This major effort got premium pay of fifty cents an hour: \$3.50 each. We all slept well that night!

In the late summer of 1943 the Clarence Bonney family left the farm and moved to Wessington Springs. Dad and mother were employed by the college—dad firing furnaces and mother as head cook. President W.A. Harden extended this offer to them in part because the President's brother had been at the college when my Dad was. Initially they lived in a ground floor apartment in the women's dormitory and my three younger brothers lived nearby. I lodged on the third floor of the women's' dorm—temporarily converted into men's housing. We entered and exited from our

digs by the outside steel fire escape. I had a room by myself which helped my study habits.

In the end all five of my sisters and brothers attended WSJC, as did a number of cousins. I have grade slips from three semesters in 1943 and 1944 showing that I took twelve courses, earned 43.5 credits with an average of about a B. Indeed, small as WSJC was, the education there was thorough and professional. One semester I took Greek, Botany, U.S. History, Contemporary History, English Composition, Minor Prophets *and* A Capella! And I'm not a singer. I also can't believe I got a "B." Someone was kind.

With Wessington Springs as my home base I came back from Seattle Pacific, Greenville, and Asbury Seminary during some summers. I worked at the college doing a variety of things including unskilled labor on the dairy buildings, plastering, campus clean-up, etc., etc. Mother provided stability at the Bonney corner of College Avenue as her children moved in and out during our school years. Dad's health saw ups and downs up until his early death in 1955. After this Mother enrolled at WSJC herself and earned a teaching certificate.

The WSJC Legacy

WSCJ though influential in my own life and the lives of many others, was never particularly financially stable—as is evidenced by my own grandfather's sizable loan to the college. Numerous schemes were devised to shore up these shaky finances, including the opening of a fully functioning dairy under the leadership of President A.C. Wolcott. Dairy cows were imported from Wisconsin and grazed on the hilly acres behind campus. This gave local residents locally produced and bottled milk rather than the milk that was shipped in from Huron or Mitchell.

The whole program was mildly successful, but could not provide the mass of dollars required to secure the financial future of the college. Despite the best efforts of Wolcott and his successor, George Kline, WSJC was forced to close its doors, first discontinuing its college curriculum in 1964 and closing the high school in 1968. The college was merged with Central Christian College in Kansas in 1964 where Bruce Kline became president.

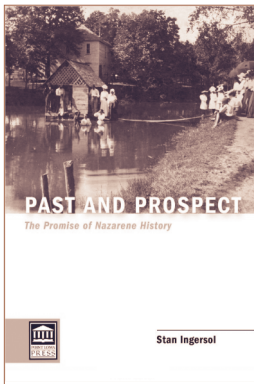
The Wessington Springs legacy cannot be measured in dollars or buildings, however, but in the kingdom service it produced in my family and countless others. My three brothers and I together logged about 175 years given to public and Christian education, Free Methodist World Missions, pastoral appointments, and superintendencies. This is just a small sample of what WSJC people have done many times over. □

▷ DEDICATION OF ARCHIVE ROOM – On Friday, April 10, 2015, the new climate-controlled archives room, completed in 2013, will be dedicated and named in honor of Evelyn Marston Mottweiler. The daughter of Bishop L. R. Marston, Evelyn was the Executive Secretary (Director) of the Historical Center from 1971 to 1988. Subsequently Evelyn was President of Women's Ministries International, and with her husband Jack served the church in several other capacities.

▷ TRIBUTE TO LOUISE CAMPBELL (1929-2014) – Louise Campbell served as a member of the Committee on Free Methodist History and Archives from 1982 until 2011—one of its longest serving members. She was influential in establishing policies for acquiring, processing, and preserving key church records and documents. Furthermore, she helped set up procedures for obtaining church records and transferring them to Marston Historical Center. She also took initiative on countless other projects including developing a library of oral history projects, of both church leaders and "average" church members who have stories to tell.

Book Review

Past and Prospect: The Promise of Nazarene History
by Stan Ingersol (Published in 2014 Wipf & Stock Publishers,
available at Amazon.com, and www.wipfandstock.com)



In 2004 Stan Ingersol spoke at the “Search for the Free Methodist Soul” symposium in Indianapolis, sponsored by the Marston Historical Center. His presentation was titled “Free Methodist Trajectories.” Ingersol is a Nazarene church historian and archivist who challenged Free Methodists to understand the passions that drove their denomination’s founders, and the pressures that subsequently threatened the founding vision. Four years later, Ingersol utilized the same method to

examine his own denomination. The result is *Past and Prospect: The Promise of Nazarene History*.

Free Methodists and Nazarenes share common roots in the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition. Both emphasize heart religion, ministry to the poor, ordination of women, and global missions. Yet, in the past century, both churches pulled away from these roots toward a more generic fundamentalism and mainstream evangelicalism. Highlighting this reality, Ingersol tells how the Church of the Nazarene formed by uniting smaller churches with a common holiness vision, how controversies surrounding baptism and eschatology were kept on the periphery so that Nazarene identity could form around holiness teaching and social action. Nevertheless, fundamentalism (and later evangelicalism) pushed some peripheral issues back into the church, watering down the original passion of Nazarene founders. Ingersol argues that these problems persist today.

For example, he challenges his church’s current organizational structure, arguing it unfairly limits the full representation of members from rapidly growing areas like

Africa, Asia, and Latin America. He sees today’s Nazarene denomination as being heavily influenced by managerial approaches to leadership that keep authority concentrated too heavily in North America. The passion of early Nazarene leaders should compel the church toward a structure that gives greater voice to leaders throughout the entire church.

Past and Prospect: The Promise of Nazarene History is a helpful introduction to Nazarene history, but it goes farther, culling from that history wisdom for the present day that is helpful for leaders beyond the Nazarene denomination. Ingersol reminds us: “History, which sets today’s table, has been setting tomorrow’s as well.”

— Keith Simpson

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