

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLISS PIONEER MEMORIAL CHURCH

Following the arrival of several pioneer homesteaders in Bliss Township, the East Bliss Congregation of the United Brethren Church was established in the year 1880 by a Reverend Anderson, who was just 18 years of age. The charter members were Mr. & Mrs. Hugh Kilpatrick, Mr. & Mrs. James Kilpatrick, and Mr. & Mrs. Franklin Keiser and son Charles. Services were first held in the Garber School, a log building which stood at the southwest corner of the junction of present-day Garber Road and Pleasantview Road; later, services were held in the East Bliss School building which still stands just east of the church.

Reverend Anderson was the first of the thirteen United Brethren ministers that served the new congregation before this church building was erected. Following Reverend Anderson, who served one year, there successively came the Reverends Groh, Tripp, Smith, Chapman, and Edwards, each of whom served one or two years during the period of 1881-1899.

The congregation conducted a Decoration Day Program in 1891 to honor the Civil War dead buried in the nearby Bliss Township cemetery. A similar program has been conducted every year since then, although the holiday is now called Memorial Day. For that first program, the church women made an extralong, 44-star American flag which was subsequently used for many more years. (Wyoming had become the 44<sup>th</sup> state in 1890 and Utah was to follow in 1896.) Mr. Gideon Noel served as president of the Decoration Day Association for many years.

In the year 1899, the Reverend Edward McFarland came to minister to the East Bliss Congregation and stayed for six years. It was during his ministry that this church was constructed on one acre of land deeded by Franklin Keiser to the United Brethren Church Conference.

The nearby woodlands provided the necessary timber, which was sawn into lumber at J. F. Joscelyn's mill, located across the road and just west of the church site; some of the lumber may have also been produced at A. B. Klise's mill at Sturgeon Bay. Mr. Orrin E. Merwin served as chief carpenter and also personally constructed the bird's-eye maple pulpit. The pew components were probably produced at Van Avery's mill in Van, Michigan, according to Orrin's son Lester, who as a child watched the carpenters assemble the pews in the church.

The seven windows were purchased by individual church members. Five of them bear the names or initials of the donors: Reverend McFarland, Mr. & Mrs. Wilson Mann, Mr. & Mrs. Stephen E. Cosens, James Frank Joscelyn, and Charles L. Keiser. William Kilpatrick purchased the southeast window and Franklin Keiser the northwest one (near the front entrance), but they declined to have their names placed upon them.

Originally, the church ceiling was constructed of lath and plaster, in semi-cathedral form, and was about three feet higher than the present ceiling. The walls were painted pale green and trimmed with a gold stenciled border along the top. At first, illumination for evening services

was provided by three kerosene angle-lamps\* suspended on long hooks in the ceiling and standard kerosene lamps on the walls; later, the angle-lamps were replaced with gas lanterns. Heat was provided by two wood-burning stoves, one on either side of the room.

- The angle-lamp had a pair of wicks and chimneys which were mounted on a common base and tilted relative to each other.

The new church was dedicated on May 4, 1903. Sunday worship services were conducted regularly in the mornings and evening and prayer meetings were held on Thursday evenings. Regular Sunday School classes and some summer conventions of the North Emmet Sunday School Association Union, were conducted here under the guidance of the American Sunday School Union, which was established and long represented in this region by their District Missionary, the Reverend George A. Weaver. At noon, the conventions were recessed for dinner at tables in the grove beside the church.

After Reverend McFarland left in 1905, the church continued to flourish under the spiritual leadership of the following ministers, who usually began their pastorates in September:

George W. Dearborn	1905-06	T. H. Winters	1913-14
Asa A. Keiser	1906-09	W. H. Jones	1914-15
Guy R. Champlin	1909-10	E. P. Richards	1915-16
Orla J. Montgomery	1910-11	William McCurdy	1916-17
(No resident		J. H. Date	1917-18
minister during 1944-12)		W. E. Seymour	1918-20
Anna Schultz	1912-13	A. M. Lovejoy	192?-23

The parsonage was originally near the northwest corner of the cemetery, the second house in a row of three that once stood north of the grocery store on the west side of present-day Pleasantview Road; at that time, there was also a Maccabees meeting hall just north of those residences. After the Calvin Van Louven family moved to Montana in 1913, their house was acquired for the parsonage; also gone, that house stood across the road and slightly east of the church. The congregation often gathered at the parsonage for pitch-in meals and fellowship. On one such occasion when several women brought pies, one of them told Mrs. Wilson Mann that of all the pumpkin pies there, she thought Mrs. Mann's was the best. "There wasn't any pumpkin in it," Mrs. Mann responded matter-of-factly. "I used carrots."

A few of the ministers, including Reverend Anna Schultz, resided in the home of Mr. & Mrs. Orrin (Lydia) Merwin, who often provided overnight lodging for visitors as well. An ever-present help to the sick and needy, Lydia was a familiar sight as she traveled about with horse and buggy. She also taught the children's Sunday School class and served as Superintendent of Cradle Roll.

Wilson Mann served as Sunday School Superintendent until about 1918, when Mr. Merwin accepted that responsibility. Mr. Mann was also the leader of the adult class for many

years and his wife, the former Fidilla Keiser, served as a Sunday School teacher. Mr. Ralph Cosens taught the young people's class and also served as the Sunday School Superintendent. Della Shinn, who later became Mrs. Ralph Cosens, was one of the leaders of the young people's Christian Endeavor services. On one occasion, Della invited all the young people to her home and treated them to a dinner of fried chicken, biscuits, and roast corn. Reverend Richards was especially popular with the young people's class.

Music was an important part of the religious services. Mrs. Gideon (Ida) Noel served as organist for many years; after she was no longer able to play, Della Shinn became the organist. Among those who sang in the choir were Calvin Van Louven, Ralph Cosens, Ruth Cosens (who later married Dow Mallory), Asa Keiser, Charles and Salina Garber Keiser and their daughter Lottie.

Each summer the Ladies Aid Society held an ice cream social in the grove beside the church to earn money. The women also made quilts to sell, using the funds from the two projects to help the church meet expenses. Another of the Society's activities was spring cleaning at the church, when the pews were carried outside and washed. The regular meetings of the Society were held in the women's homes.

Many funerals were conducted here; there were a few weddings too, but usually those ceremonies were performed in the home.

Before this church was constructed, an annual community Christmas program was held in the nearby schoolhouse; later, it was held alternately in the church and schoolhouse. For the children, one of the highlights of the program was the candy in colorful boxes given to them by Reverend Weaver. In the church, the Christmas tree was placed on the platform, near the front entrance.

In 1923, the church membership and financial support began to decline. To a large extent, the decline was caused by World War I, which took many young men from Bliss Township. Several church families also moved away during the war and immediate post-war years because of job opportunities in the cities. As a result, it became difficult to retain full-time ministers. Part-time and volunteer ministers served from 1923 until 1949, when regular services were discontinued.

Over the years, both before and after regular services were discontinued, some features of the building have been altered and, additionally, certain furnishings added to the sanctuary. During World War I, the service flag was purchased by Della Shinn Cosens and presented to the church; she also prepared the hand-written list of the Bliss Township servicemen, for which Mrs. Alan (Mary) MacDougal furnished the frame. (The service flag was framed many years later, in 1982.) The American and Church flags and their standards were gifts from Mrs. Oscar (Hazel) Overholt, presented to the church in 1965. The oil lamps at the windows were installed in 1974, a gift from Pansyruth Brock McCleary; she also initiated the Memorial Fund in 1966.

A spire that was originally on the steeple (seen in early photographs of the church) was removed long ago because of its deteriorated condition; then in 1982, the open bell loft was enclosed with louvers to protect it- especially the bell support timbers- from rain and snow.

During the 1940's the original ceiling was removed and replaced with the present lower ceiling in an effort to improve the heating of the church; at that time, the two wood stoves were replaced with the present oil stove. The attached restrooms were added to the building in 1970.

Gone are the accommodations that were provided for the horses and buggies: hitching rails near the road and, for inclement weather, a long three-sided shelter on the west side, towards the back of the church yard.

After regular services were discontinued, a board of trustee of former members continued to oversee the property. Of the many trustees and other individuals who have contributed in various ways to the preservation of this church, perhaps none served with more dedication than Mr. Lawrence Overholt. In addition to his labor on the building- which included serving as leader of the crews which lowered the ceiling and, later, resingled the roof- he personally paid the building insurance for several years, until the insurance company declined to insure the building any longer. He served as chairman of the board of trustees from 1956 to 1959, when he resigned because of poor health.

In 1965, the property was purchased from the United Brethren Church Conference and renamed the Bliss Pioneer Memorial Church.

In 1979, the Michigan Historical Commission was requested to give historical recognition to the church. In a letter of response dated March 3, 1980, the Commission sent notification that the church had been listed in the State Register of Historical Sites. Efforts were then directed toward raising the funds and preparing the text for an official marker. The ensuing purchase and installation of the marker which now stands in front of the church was culminated with a dedication ceremony during the Memorial Day Program.

A Fall Homecoming religious service is also held here on the first Sunday of each October. First held in 1964, this annual service ensures the building's tax-free status as a church. The Centennial Birthday of the East Bliss Church Congregation was observed at the 1980 Fall Homecoming service.

Once the home of a vibrant, year-round congregation, the church building now quietly stands as a memorial to the early pioneers- resounding briefly in the spring and fall to the annual services of remembrance.

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This history is based primarily upon the records and recollections of Mrs. Carl (Maud) Bacon and Mrs. Charles (Pansyruth) McCleary. Particularly invaluable are the early records kept by Maud's mother, Fidilla Keiser Mann, who's life (1873-1966) spanned all the active years of the United Brethren Congregation's existence in Bliss (1880-1949). Pansyruth served as

Secretary-Treasurer of the Church Control Board of Trustees from 1956 to 1983 and has especially good records for all those years.

Any significant records or recollections that anyone else can contribute to this compilation, particularly for the “golden years” of 1903-1923, would be most welcome. Please send your information, along with your name and address, to me at the address below.

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