

The End of An Era 1890 - 1906

Today, in 1990, we look to the year 2000, the turn of the new century, with a great anticipation. The things we have always heard about the twenty-first century will be just ahead of us, waiting to happen. So, too, was the case in 1890. Our forefathers looked ahead to the turn of the twentieth century, with the same anticipation and excitement we feel today. Little could they know what would await them across that threshold. These were people who, barely thirty years before, had seen their country ripped apart in the great Civil War, a war which, we are sure, they thought was a war to end all wars. "They couldn't begin to imagine that before the decade was even through, America would have been involved in, and won, a war with Spain; and just after that, a third president in thirty-five years would be dead, having given his life for his country; then, barely fifteen years into the new decade, they would be involved in an even greater war, this time of global proportions.

But little could they, in 1890, know what the coming decades would hold, for this was, as Mark Twain referred to the period, "The Gilded Age." The Civil War was over; its only reminder, a group of aging Grand Army Veterans. Big business was the Word of the day in most places. But outside of the cities, in the rural areas, life was different . . . not quite so hectic. Big businessmen such as Carnegie and the Vanderbilts, were left to Pittsburgh and New York. New Tripoli in the 1890s was a place that few of us can even imagine. There were many different names leading our business sector in what was still basically an agrarian community. However, scattered about the town were hotel-keepers and milliners, shipping agents and furniture makers, storekeepers and funeral directors-a mix of businesses not even seen today.

It was these people who made up the Lutheran and Reformed congregations of Ebenezer Church in 1890. They were still, just as their ancestors before them had been, of good, hardy, Pennsylvania-German stock, and the church played just as important a role in their lives as it had for their ancestors. Much of their social life centered around the church. Leading these people in their spiritual needs were Rev. Henry Swinehart Fegley, Lutheran minister, and Rev. Nevin W. Helffrich, Reformed minister. With the building of our present edifice in 1890, we can probably guess that both ministers had reached one of the highest points of their long careers at Ebenezer. It seems that many ministers' careers can be measured by the churches that they helped to erect, and the congregations that they have helped develop. One can only imagine the strength with which these men must have led their congregations to build such a spectacular building that today, one hundred years later, still stands as a monument to those fine people and the ministers under whom they worshiped.

Once the celebrating was over, and the new building was put into active use, the reality of the situation finally set in. The two congregations were faced with a debt of over \$20,000. By today's standards, that is a pretty formidable amount to repay, but that sum is in 1890 dollars. Based upon two independent architectural evaluations conducted recently, the cost to build this building today would be \$1,000,000.¹⁹ That means that each one of those 1890 dollars would be equal to fifty 1990 dollars. So, here they were, with so much hope for a bright new future, occupying a beautiful new church building, but with this one, little nagging problem of the church debt

holding them back. So, it was left to the men, in what was then a man's world of business and finance, to handle the paying-off of the church debt, or so they thought.

Spreading across the country in those days, from city to city, was a movement known as the Women's Suffrage Movement. In the most narrow of contexts, it was the attempt by women to achieve the right to vote in this country. However, in a broader sense, it was also the women's desire *to be considered equals of the men around them*. They were tired of being considered second-class citizens, and their voices were beginning to unite in one front that would eventually be heard from coast to coast.

As most know, it would be a number of years before this goal would be achieved. Today, looking back, we often tend to see their movement as one that was carried forward in the metropolitan centers of our great and growing country. Many of us would have a hard time imagining that our mothers, grandmothers, and even great-grandmothers, could have been a part of this movement, given the way life in rural America was in those days. We can be sure that even they themselves would have had difficulty with being compared to those women who were considered little more than shameless women, of loose moral fiber. However, the passage of time lets us look back now and reevaluate incidents in the past, that seemed so innocent then. Take, for example, the founding of the "Ladies Aid Society" of Ebenezer Church. Many would say that these women were not suffragists, but look a little closer. They were women who wanted to be heard.

And so it was, that on February 26, 1898, twelve women (Mrs. Rev. Henry S. Fegley, Mrs. Elias K. Gildner, Mrs. Frank Krause, Mrs. Dr. James A. Kressley, Mrs. Clinton E. Leiby, Mrs. Reuben H. Fister, Mrs. Peter Loch, Mrs. Edwin D. Snyder, Mrs. William A. Reimert, Mrs. Theodore F. Ayers, Miss Annie Mosser, and Miss Ida V. Mosser) met for the first time and perfected this organization that would serve the church dutifully for well over sixty years and, most importantly, in those sixty years these women "would" be heard.

Its formal objectives, as written in its constitution, were as follows:

- "1) To assist the congregations worshiping in this church to raise money for the defraying of their expenses.
- 2) To look after the sick and needy.
- 3) To render assistance to the pastors whenever and wherever necessary.
- 4) To create a spirit of love and friendliness among the members of the congregations and to 'provoke one another to good work.'
- 5) To look after the decorations and general beautifying of the house of God."

However, in a history of the Ladies Aid Society, written by its secretary, Bertha A. Rauch, upon the group's 25th anniversary, she very eloquently states that by the sales of quilts and aprons and

through the collection of membership dues, they were "laying up money in the treasury," which was then to be applied to "wipe out the heavy burden which then rested on the congregations."

She continued by stating:

"The little drops that seem so trifling and powerless, after all may form large and powerful streams, so the pennies, nickels, dimes and quarters that steadily flowed in the Society's treasury, formed a torrent of no small force. *It was the means of getting the male members of the congregations to see what could be accomplished by united and concerted action* (of the women), and they likewise united in earnest endeavor and wiped out the church debt, which in those days seemed almost impossible."

She felt, had it not been for this heavy burden of debt and the unpleasant lot in which both congregations found themselves, "that the Aid Society would hardly have come into existence." She finished by very pointedly stating that she doubts "if it were not for the women, not only of our local church, but throughout the land, the churches would rapidly go to decay." Fortunately for us today, these women were there to help prevent this from happening.

At one of the first meetings of the Ladies Aid Society, officers were elected, consisting of Mrs. Ayers, president; Mrs. Phaon Oswald, vice-president; Mrs. Fegley, secretary; and Mrs. Gildner, treasurer. A membership drive was initiated, and by the end of the first year it had fifty-eight members. A constitution committee was formed and a constitution was written with the help and expertise of Rev. Fegley. Rev. Fegley, up until the time of his death, would remain a very special friend of the society, often presiding at the opening of its meetings by leading in prayer, and reading of scripture. His death in 1906 would be noted with a profound sense of loss by these women.

Two early patrons of the society were Jonas German, owner of New Tripoli's Hotel German, and his son-in-law, James A. Miller, who for many years provided the women with the building where they met free of charge. This small building, that the group would call home, was located on Decatur Street, next to the former home of Raymond Mantz (see Figure #16). They would meet weekly in this room until the year 1910. Mr. Miller also provided the women with a sewing machine for use in their endeavors, and Mr. German provided their first quilting frame.

Over the years, these women would conduct many fund-raising activities, not the least of which being the sale of quilts. From what their records indicate, these women were adept seamstresses, and could turn out one, two, and even three quilts in a Saturday, depending upon the number of women who participated. Their first quilt was made from material donated by Mrs. William F. Krause. In addition to quilts, the women would make sun-bonnets, coverlets, aprons, and crib quilts which, in turn, would be sold, with some even going to owners as far away as Philadelphia.

Other types of fund raisers were held, too. On the evening of July 2, 1898, an ice-cream festival was held in the church grove, with the New Tripoli Band providing the entertainment. A total profit of \$63.50 was realized that night. Lectures were often held at 25 cents a head, with children under the age of ten attending free. One of the earliest attempts to raise funds was by

selling photographs of the church at 35 cents a piece. This would be tried again in 1909, by selling picture-postcards and photographs of the Harvest-Home display, with a small inset of then pastor, Rev. George Smith (see Figure #17). The photos and postcards were generously donated by James D. Snyder, New Tripoli's own photographer. The proceeds of this sale were used to buy offering plates for the church. In 1902 an egg supper was held, and in 1906 a concert was held in the church basement, with the Muhlenberg College Glee Club providing the entertainment.

It would appear that in a small town where the availability of entertainment was surely very limited, these women helped to provide a good, wholesome social life, filled with enjoyable activities in which the congregation members could participate.

Aside from that, they provided a place where all of the women of the town, not just church members, could get together for some socializing and camaraderie. In addition, they provided social outings for the women. They make note in their records of an outing to Dorney's Park in July of 1906, and also of their annual sleigh ride, which would end up at one of the nearby country hotels for a hearty and enjoyable meal. One year they dined at Miller's in New Tripoli; another year they traveled to Newside; and still another year they were off to Seagersville.

The women who formed this group felt that they had a purpose; that purpose was to show the men that they could be a formidable presence in relieving them of the heavy debt they found themselves under, after building the church. We also feel that these women sensed they were on a mission—a mission to further God's work here on earth—as can be attested to by the records of its meeting of December 22, 1900.

It states:

"As this was the last meeting shortly before Christmas, we entered into the exercises of the meeting with great joy. We realized that not only was Christmas a day to be celebrated by persons separately (but also) by Sunday Schools and churches. The same spirit of this sacred day entered into our society (which is) a part of our church. Although we held no special services, the joyful, thankful spirit of Christmas Day was present with us.

"We then entered upon the regular work of the day with renewed earnestness showing that we were engaged in the Master's work and that he would be well pleased at his coming to find us working for his cause. We felt sure we could not celebrate Christmas in any better way.

By the year 1902, barely twelve years after the church was built, the debt had been paid off. Little is known of how the men financed their share of it, but the women could take much pride in the part they had played, donating hundreds of dollars toward the debt during that twelve-year period. With that taken care of, the Ladies Aid Society dropped its monthly dues from 10 cents to 5 cents. However, they continued quilting and working in earnest, in order to raise funds to present the church with other gifts as needed, and to further their mission.

Over the ensuing years, the presence of these women would continue to be felt in many areas. It would be hard to pick one word which would describe the women who comprised this group,

and their activities, for many came to mind: loving; caring; and, most importantly, generous. If it hadn't been for these women, much of our church wouldn't look the way it does today. Over the years, these women provided much of the impetus which resulted in the overall beautification of the building, whose anniversary we celebrate this year.

One of its first campaigns was to provide \$850 toward the installation of steam-heating in 1899. In the year 1900 the women felt that the church was in need of carpeting; thus, \$175 was donated to pay for its purchase and installation. Other purchases over the years covered everything from lamps for the church to landscaping the church lawn.

In the many years that the Ladies Aid Society was in existence, it certainly lived up to its five "constitutional objectives," wholeheartedly. It very ably fulfilled its "purpose, "by opening the eyes it wanted to open. And, lastly, so many of its members, who are lovingly remembered today, did work so diligently for the Master's cause here on earth, completing their mission" and passing on to their final reward.

The years 1903 and 1904 saw another milestone in the church's history, this time with the church's music program. It was in 1903 that Rev. Fegley, William H. Reitz, and Elias K. Gildner contacted the Carnegie Foundation in an attempt to acquire a pipe organ for the new church. The Carnegie Foundation was founded by Andrew Carnegie, with the intent of distributing his vast fortune to worthy causes. Being the philanthropist that he was, the idea of helping to provide pipe organs to churches must have appealed to Mr. Carnegie. Upon receipt of their request, approval was given for the purchase of a new organ, as long as the church fulfilled one requirement-that was that it must be debt free.

Since the building debt had been paid off in 1902, the church was free to order its new organ, and in January of 1904 an agreement of sale was drawn up between the Barckhoff Organ Company of Pomeroy, Ohio, and Ebenezer Church, with the backing of Andrew Carnegie. Upon a total payment of \$2,500, half this sum donated by the Carnegie Foundation, the congregations became the proud owners of a Barckhoff two-manual, tracker-action organ with pedal organ. The organ was installed in late February of 1904, and after installation was inspected by Prof. C. A. Marcks of Muhlenberg College, Allentown, on March 5, 1904. Consecration services were held on June 5, 1904. This organ continued to serve both congregations with some modifications and many repairs for over forty years, allowing the church to continue to live up to its name of the "Organ Church."