

Elmira church endures 125 years

By Jerry Bowen

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In 1859 the Annual Methodist Conference in Sacramento decided to raise funds for a Methodist college. The site chosen was in the Yolo County community known today as Zamora. Because of the poor quality of the clay there, the site was abandoned, even though work already had begun on the building.

At the annual conference of 1860, the decision to relocate the Pacific Methodist College to Vacaville was made largely because existing buildings were offered and ready for use. Among the trustees and solicitors for the college were Mason Wilson, Dr. W. J. Dobbins and Josiah Allison.

When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, southern sympathies in California caused many serious problems whenever the word South was attached to the name of the church. In some cases, people were even sent to churches in order to hear what was said. Often, when they heard nothing but the gospel or expressed sympathies for the South, they tried to destroy the churches or related buildings.

In the years following Lincoln's assassination, the past events were still very much on the minds of the citizens of Elmira when they decided to erect their own house of worship. In the spring of 1876 they resolved to organize a church with no particular denomination. The organizers felt that since the congregation would be composed of people of different faiths, the people could work together better as an interdenominational group.

James McCrory was asked to act as agent to raise funds for the building, but he declined on the grounds that it could not be a success unless it was affiliated with an established conference and attended to by properly licensed preachers.

The people of Elmira felt that McCrory's assistance was so important that they agreed the new church would become a Methodist congregation. Of course, McCrory was a Methodist but the church owes its existence today to the stand taken by him at the very outset, for without a designated denomination, the church would quite probably never have been built.

The property was purchased with money raised by Mr. McCrory and work on the building begun. All labor was volunteered by the men of the town. It is interesting to note that the steeple was not constructed on top of the church, but on the ground and

then raised into place with pulleys. This operation nearly cost the life of Steve Cripps, who was hit on the head by one of the pulleys as it fell.

The iron rods which hold the walls together and support the steeple, were made and installed by William Cadman, who was Elmira's blacksmith.

The highly respected Rev. Joel Hedgespeth who was pastor of the church in Vacaville at this time consented to support the church's needs and later was appointed to Elmira. Dr. J. C. Simmons was the first presiding elder.

The first board of trustees was composed of James McCrory, (chairman), Drury Parker, F. B. Chandler, George Frazier and William Fry. The Sunday school was organized immediately following dedicatory services conducted by Bishop H. H. Kavanaugh with about 75 people present. In January of the next year (1877) James McCrory was elected superintendent and G. H. Frazier assistant, with C. E. Roberts as secretary.

Over the ensuing years, Elmira was ravaged by fire several times. Many families were burned out and they moved away, reducing the population of Elmira.

In 1882, M. B. Sharborough from Mississippi was in charge of the church as minister. He used a clever method of rebuilding the steadily declining congregation. For 40 nights he, with some help, preached the gospel as well as holding the regular Sunday services, hoping to attract new members. In the end he gained one new member for each day of preaching. Many of the 40 new members were some of the more substantial citizens of the community

In the fire of 1890 several houses were destroyed. On one occasion, as their own houses burned, the men having no firefighting equipment formed a bucket line and soaked the side walls of the church in order to keep it from burning. It is such loyalty as this which has prevented the historic building from becoming just another faded memory. Today, 125 years later, the building still serves the community as the primary house of worship.

On April 9, 1933, a Founders Day Service was held. Several letters were received from past members of the church who had since moved away. One of the more interesting letters was from a Berkeley resident:

"I note in a recent 'Reporter' that the (Methodist) Community Church will give a Founders Day program a week from Sunday, and the committee requests items of interest concerning the early days of the Church. I am reminded of a poem I received recently on the death of 'Indian Tom,' a well-known character in Elmira in the 1880s. At that time he was in the employ of Dr. Meeker, as a general helper I think.

“He was a regular attendant of the Church, always neatly dressed, and took part in the ceremonial acts of the service, gazing very intently into his hymn book during the song service. (We were amused over the discovery that the hymn book was upside down.) I think he finally became a member - one who conducted himself above reproach. Some time later he made his home in Napa City, making his living doing yard work. I do not know the date of his death.”

Another letter told of a character of the old days, Richard Darling, an eccentric who wore newspapers for undershirts and never owned an overcoat. His favorite occupation was to sit by the stove in church and sleep through all services.

Over the last 125 years, the church building has undergone only a few changes, the most notable was the addition of an annex in the back. The building is in excellent shape because of the remarkable workmanship originally put into it and the loving care of people who maintained and repaired it.

Elmira can truly be proud of its church. Services are still being conducted under the auspices of the Vacaville Foursquare Church and named “Oasis.” With a little luck it will still be in use another century from now.

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