

REV. WILLIAM SCHULER HARRIS

(1865-1956)

Minister, Writer, Entrepreneur and Developer

by Suzanne M. Shultz

Editor's Note: An active member of Calvary United Methodist Church of Harrisburg, the author has a degree in education from Shippensburg University and a master's in American Studies from Penn State University. Currently the medical librarian for Harrisburg's Polyclinic Medical Center, Ms. Shultz has employed her spiritual, academic and vocational interests to weave a fascinating account of a remarkable man. We are pleased she has selected THE CHRONICLE to publish the results of her research.

Matthais W. Harris was born May 12, 1837, in Sullivan County and died September 17, 1887, in Carthage, Missouri. Married to Carrie Sanger on February 22, 1858, he had six children -- four sons and two daughters. He joined the Evangelical Association at the age of 21 and preached in the Central Pennsylvania Conference for 13 years at the following appointments: Liverpool (1860-61), Franklin Circuit (1861-63), Columbia Circuit (1863-65), Buffalo Circuit (1865-67), Shrewsbury (1867-69), Muncy (1869-71), Liberty (1871-72), Center Circuit (1872-73). He then moved west to become a traveling preacher in the Kansas Conference.

An outspoken Prohibitionist, Rev. Harris died suddenly and unexpectedly of nervous fever¹ on September 17, 1887, the year his son William Schuler Harris completed his theological studies in Eastern Pennsylvania. This son, the subject of this paper, was to preach for over 50 years during the split and re-union of the Evangelical Association - United Evangelical - Evangelical Church and become the middle link of a three generation family commitment to that denomination's ordained ministry.

United Evangelical Minister

William S. Harris was born October 3, 1865, in New Columbia, Pennsylvania. He received his grammar school education in Wilkes-Barre and joined the work force as a picker in the coal mines, but very little else is known of his early years. On the recommendation of Wilkes-Barre's Grove Street Church, he later entered Wyoming Seminary and completed his studies there in

1887. He received his license to preach March 17, 1888, and served briefly in the Kansas Conference at the Carthage (Missouri) Mission and Circuit. Rev. Harris then returned to the East Pennsylvania Conference and preached at the following appointments: Sparrowbush and Matamoras (1889-90), Sunbury (1890-92), Easton (1892-93), Lykens (1893-96), Pottstown (1896-1900), Lemoyne Grace (1900-03), Harrisburg Park Street (1903-07), Harrisburg Park Street, Charlton and Penbrook Trinity (1907-08), Harrisburg Park Street (1908-12), Penbrook Trinity, Charlton and Rutherford Heights (1912-17), Rutherford Heights and Charlton (1917-18), Penbrook Trinity and Harrisburg Sixth Street (1918-1920), Harrisburg Sixth Street (1920-22), Steelton Grace (1923-27), Nazareth (1929-39).

Rev. Harris married Emma Sands in the late 1880's and the marriage was blessed with five children: Ruth (1890), Esther (1891), John S. (1894), Edwin B. (1896) and William S. (1901). Edwin B. Harris was named in honor of Rev. Edwin Bergstresser whom Rev. Harris very much admired. In fact one of Harris' books was dedicated to Rev. Bergstresser, "...whose tested friendship I have enjoyed for nearly ten years and whose kindly influence helped me to persevere in writing this allegory..."²

Two years after the death of his wife Emma in 1927, Rev. Harris married Mrs. Amelia J. (Saible) Kichline, widow of Rev. Clayton Kichline, a bishop in the Evangelical Church. Originally from a Roman Catholic background, Mrs. Kichline had converted to the Evangelical Church at a revival meeting. She spoke Pennsylvania German, a heritage from her mother, fluently enough to preach in the dialect at the church in Ackermanville. The new Mrs. Harris had two grown children of her own, Edith and Clayton H. Kichline. Edith owned an exclusive millinery shop in Allentown and Clayton, Jr., was a minister. It was with Mrs. Edith Kichline Lutz that Rev. Harris resided at the time of his death in 1956.

Rev. Harris' ministerial career was one of a missionary for the Evangelical Church, building new churches and expanding existing ones. As a builder, he is said to have been responsible for erecting the first sanctuary of the entire United Evangelical Church when he was pastor at Sunbury 1890-92. Although that denomination was not officially organized until 1894, the division of the Evangelical Association that led to its formation became effective in 1891. "In reality this fight was more a clash of personalities than

anything else... there were several bishops involved, namely, Bishops Esher and Bowman, who were the heads of the Evangelical Association side, and Bishop Dubs, who became the bishop for the United Evangelicals."³ The United Evangelical branch was the one with which Rev. Harris sided.

Grace Church in Lemoyne was Rev. Harris' first Harrisburg appointment. Although technically within the bounds of the Central Pennsylvania Conference, it was originally a mission outreach from Harrisburg and Rev. Harris was the last pastor to serve there from the East Pennsylvania Conference. The first sanctuary had been erected by Rev. Samuel L. Wiest in 1893. Rev. Harris organized a \$4000 enlargement program upon his arrival in March 1900, and he oversaw the dedication of the improved facility in October of that same year. When he left in 1903, all the indebtedness save \$400.00 had been paid.

Park Street Church in Harrisburg, the second church he was responsible for erecting, became Rev. Harris' next appointment. Although such extended appointments were uncommon at that time, he appears to have served there more or less continuously from 1903 to 1912.

While serving Park Street, Rev. Harris apparently engaged in church planting and established Penbrook's Trinity Church, located at 25th and Canby Streets. He is listed as that congregation's first pastor, and his efforts there led to the laying of the cornerstone in August 1906 and the dedication of the present building by Bishop Rudolph Dubs on April 14, 1907. During that time he received a supplemental salary of \$10.00 a month for his pastoral duties at Trinity.

Part of the difficulty encountered in tracing the assignments of Evangelical pastors in this period is that the charge names and the congregations affiliated with the charges changed almost yearly. For example, from 1899 to 1903, Paxtonia [Charlton] was "served along with Park Street Church in Harrisburg, then in 1903 to 1907 the church was... served with the Dauphin Circuit. From 1907 to 1908, one year, it was served with Harrisburg Park Street and Penbrook... From 1908 to 1912, it was served under the Penbrook Mission, consisting of Penbrook and Paxtonia... From 1912 to 1917, it was served under the Rutherford Heights Mission, which consisted of Penbrook, Paxtonia and Rutherford Heights... From 1917 to 1920, it was served under the Rutherford Heights Mission, which consisted

of Paxtonia and Rutherford Heights..."⁴ As indicated by the record of Rev. Harris' service, given earlier in the paper, his appointments involve all of these churches during these periods.

The Charlton Church was served by Rev. Harris on two distinct occasions -- once, 1907-08, while it was attached to the Park Street appointment; again, 1912-17, while it was attached to the Rutherford Heights appointment. During his first appointment there he was assisted by Rev. John Graybill; serving as associate pastors during his second appointment there were Rev. Samuel L. Wiest (1912-13), Rev. Paul K. Bergman (1913-16) and Rev. John G. Rosenberger (1916-17).⁵ It is quite possible that Rev. Harris was considered an official mentor/overseer of the appointment and that the associates did much of the day-to-day ministry while he pursued other challenges and his varied personal financial interests.

Rev. Harris was fond of remembering that a small mission church in Harrisburg became a large self-supporting congregation under his leadership. The Harrisburg Sixth Street Church, a large gothic-style building which cost nearly \$29,000, was dedicated in May 1920 and Rev. Harris served as the first pastor of the new structure 1920-22. This building, at the corner of Sixth and Radnor, is now the Mt. Zion Church of God in Christ.

In 1922, the United Evangelical Church re-merged with the Evangelical Association to form the Evangelical Church. In the Harrisburg area, however, the re-merger created almost as much ill will as the original 1891-94 split. Since ownership of buildings in the United Evangelical Church remained with congregations, not the conference, the majority in each local group decided whether or not to participate in the re-merger. The following Harrisburg area churches served by Rev. Harris remained in the denomination and joined the Evangelical Church: Lemoyne Grace, Park Street, Penbrook Trinity, Charlton. Sixth Street and Rutherford Heights chose to join with other non-participating United Evangelical congregations to form the Evangelical Congregational denomination.

The records during the confusing time of the re-merger are not complete, but it appears that Rev. Harris was assigned by the re-merged Evangelical Church to serve Steelton and Dauphin. When the Dauphin congregation and the majority of those in Steelton chose not to participate in the re-merger, however,

less than half a congregation remained to be served. Undaunted, Rev. Harris led the remaining members to form Steelton's Grace Evangelical Church at 219 Locust Street. Dedicated July 27, 1924, the structure became the fifth Harrisburg area church building project (along with Lemoyne Grace, Park Street, Penbrook Trinity and Sixth Street) that Rev. Harris supervised. He served as its first pastor until he resettled outside the Harrisburg area in 1927.

Sermons by the Devil

During his long and fruitful ministry, Rev. Harris pursued a writing career, studied phrenology, ran a profitable business, dabbled successfully in building and real estate, and helped to found a major hospital.

He was an incredibly productive and imaginative writer. His first books, usually with religious themes, were published in the early 1900's by local Harrisburg (Minter, or Christian Publications) or Cleona (Holzapple) printers. They were distributed by subscription, and one of the earlier volumes reportedly sold more than one hundred thousand copies in its first year. Five books (Mr. World and Miss Church-Member, Life in a Thousand Worlds, Modern Fables and Parables, Sermons by the Devil, and A Complete Index to the Thought and Teachings of Jesus) were produced during this initial stage of his writing career. Of these, Sermons by the Devil (Minter, 1904) is still sought by theology students today. Life in a Thousand Worlds, which was dedicated to his mother, was said to be Harris' own favorite; it is a Jules Verne-type story for children that has moral teaching for adults.⁶

The Harris Grape Juice Company

Some time after 1900, while he was serving either Lemoyne Grace or Harrisburg Park Street, Rev. Harris began to make grape juice for communion purposes in his own home. Finding that he could produce a superior quality juice, he and his brothers Harvey, Edward and Burtice opened a business in Penn Yan, New York, in 1905. The Lakeside Grape Juice Company began modestly in an old wooden building on Monell Street with the eldest brother, Harvey, serving as plant superintendent. Rev. Harris maintained the main office of the company in Harrisburg, where he continued his active ministry.

The Lakeside Grape Juice Company was extremely successful, and in 1910 the brothers purchased a larger

concrete block building on Monell Street. Here they carried the grapes to the second floor for initial processing, and then conveyed them to 500 gallon kettles for cooking and pressing. The grape juice was put up in five gallon jugs and stored for several months until the final product was siphoned off, sweetened and bottled. The company sold the juice in four, six and eight ounce bottles and in pints, quarts and half gallons. The price per pint was \$0.35.

The only difficulty encountered by the brothers was the threat of litigation over the use of the name Lakeside, and they became the Harris Grape Juice Company rather than face legal entanglement over the name. The main office remained in Pennsylvania, and the Harrisburg City Directory for the period 1915 through 1917 lists Rev. Harris of 1851 Whitehall as Treasurer of the Harris Grape Juice Company. At the height of the business in 1920, the company was using 300 tons of grapes per year and employing as many as 30 men during the peak production season. The business closed in 1926 when the price of grapes escalated to the point where manufacture of unfermented grape juice was no longer profitable.⁷

Estherton

Family members also recall that Rev. Harris, in partnership with his youngest son William S. Harris, was the realtor and developer of Estherton (named for his daughter Esther). The Estherton section of Harrisburg is in northeast Harrisburg, immediately south of Interstate 81. It extends between Front and Sixth Streets from Edwin (named after his son) to Estherton Avenues. Rev. Harris also built a house at 1917 Paxton Street in 1924 for his daughter Esther Harris Booda, and she and her family resided there until 1945.

During the economic boom years from 1900 to 1929, the Harris family owned three cars (a Stutz-Bearcat, a Maxwell, and a touring car of undetermined make) and a cottage in Stone Glen (north of Harrisburg along Stoney Creek) where they entertained. After the real estate business crashed along with the stock market in 1929, Rev. Harris' income came solely from his ministry to the church.⁸ By then he was 64 years old.

[Editor's Note: This area along the river has also been known as Coxestown, named for Dr. John Cox who laid out the village in 1767 as the northernmost English settlement on the Susquehanna. His wife was named Esther and, according to Egle's 1883 county history, the name

Estherton derives from Mrs. Cox. As use of the designation Estherton pre-dates the arrival of W.S. Harris in Harrisburg, it appears that the oral family tradition conveyed to the author has taken advantage of a coincidence.]

Harrisburg's Polyclinic Hospital

Rev. Harris was a well-known figure in Harrisburg and the vicinity. On March 9, 1909, he affixed his name to the charter of the Polyclinic Hospital. A founder of the hospital, he served continuously as a member of its Board of Directors until 1915, when he was elected President. He held this post for two years, until December 1917. Under his administration the hospital, then located at the old Porter Mansion at Front and Harris Streets, made numerous renovations and planned for the addition of a two-story annex on the southeast side of the building.

Perhaps the single most significant occurrence during Rev. Harris' tenure as President of the Board of Directors, aside from the outbreak of World War I, was the hiring of Miss Katherine E. Landis as Superintendent of the hospital in April 1916.⁹ Throughout her long service to Polyclinic (she retired in 1946), Miss Landis directed the hospital business as if it were a community service and obligation, an opinion to which Rev. Harris must surely have subscribed.

It is probable that Rev. Harris knew of Miss Landis' training and capabilities because the Harris and Landis families owned cottages next to each other at Stone Glen.¹⁰ Additionally, Miss Landis may have been affiliated with the Evangelical Church; it is known that she conducted Baccalaureate Services for the Nursing School Graduation at the Sixth Street Church after it was erected in 1920 -- and even after the hospital moved to its present location at 2601 North Street in 1926 and Rev. Harris had left the Harrisburg area.

Conclusion

Rev. Harris passed away in Allentown on March 31, 1956, at the age of 90 and was buried in Paxtang Cemetery in Harrisburg. Of all the activities¹¹ in which this indomitable pastor engaged, he treasured most his work as a minister of the gospel. A man who also practiced what he preached, he lived to see all his children participate in church activities -- choir member, organist, church treasurer and pastor. Edwin

Bergstresser Harris, the namesake of the minister whom Rev. Harris admired, became an Evangelical pastor in his own right and passed away in 1982 as a retired member of the Eastern Pennsylvania Conference of the United Methodist Church.

Footnotes

1. "Biography of Rev. M.W. Harris." Der Christliche Botschafter October 24, 1887. Reputed to be the oldest German religious newspaper in the United States, Der Christliche Botschafter reported the activities of the Evangelical Association.
2. W.S. Harris, Mr. World and Miss Church-Member: A Twentieth Century Allegory, Harrisburg: Minter Company, 1900.
3. "History of Charlton United Methodist Church," page 4.
4. "History of Charlton United Methodist Church," page 8.
5. Interview with Rev. John Crawford, Charlton United Methodist Church, November 4, 1993.
6. "Clergyman of Many Talents Now Writing 10 More Books: Forging Ahead at 88," Allentown Evening Chronicle, October 15, 1953.
7. "Mountains of Concords Made Rivers of Lakeside and Harris Brothers Juice: For the Lord's Vineyard from the Vines of Yates County," Penn Yan (NY) Chronicle Express, December 24, 1953.
8. Interview with Mrs. Loy (Janet) Ross, October 18, 1993. Janet Booda Ross is the granddaughter of Rev. Harris.
9. S.M. Shultz, A History of Polyclinic Medical Center, unpublished manuscript, 1993.
10. Interview with Mrs. Loy (Janet) Ross, October 18, 1993.
11. During the declining years of his life, Rev. Harris was the chess champion of Allentown. All the while he was contemplating his next move, and much to the consternation of his opponents, he would sing hymns. Interview with Mrs. Loy (Janet) Ross, November 12, 1993.



Rev William S. Harris and the Park Street Church
from a souvenir paperweight, circa 1910

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