

A HISTORY OF THE ALTOONA ITALIAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

by George G. DiTomasso, Jr., 1994

At the turn of the twentieth century European immigration to America reached unprecedented heights. Many of these newcomers arrived in response to industry's need for inexpensive labor, and the increased population combined with low wages to create mass poverty throughout the minority communities. Recognizing the economic and spiritual needs of these immigrants, religious institutions like the Altoona Evangelization Society created missionary outreaches to address these concerns. In his 1909 volume The History of Methodism in Altoona, Pennsylvania, Homer C. Knox states, "The aliens are coming and are the raw material of American citizenship of tomorrow; what they will be and do depends largely upon what our American Protestant Christianity does for them."¹

Due to employment opportunities in the coal and railroad industries, Altoona received hundreds of Italian immigrants during the European migration to America. Although these aliens came to Altoona with the hope for a better life, poverty prevailed throughout their ethnic neighborhoods. Frequently, for example, several families shared a single outhouse. Such inconveniences were insignificant, however, in comparison to the language barrier that prevented religious and social affiliation with the existing community. The Italians needed separate institutions if they were to establish themselves.

Because religious services in Altoona were conducted in English, the foreign-speaking population could not worship in those churches. Although most Italian immigrants were Catholic, it was the Methodists that first expressed a willingness to address their specific social, religious and economic needs. As a consequence, many Italians abandoned Catholicism to accept Methodist doctrines. The need for an Italian Methodist Church in Altoona was soon apparent. In 1904 Rev. J. Ellis Bell, presiding elder of the Altoona District of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, responded to this need and secured Rev. Horace Geraldi to take charge of the Italian work.²

Rev. Geraldi conducted Italian services in the basement of the Old Produce Market House.³ He was a native of Northern Italy and came to America as a laborer. He and Luigi Falcucci, another working-class immigrant, also used the Market House as a center of education and conducted English classes there for the Italians. Although the Market House provided a convenient vacant space large enough to accommodate the Italians, it also served as a butcher shop and as the home for the hook and ladder truck and hose carriage of the Good Will Fire Company.⁴ Clearly, the Methodists needed a more appropriate location in which to continue and expand their efforts.

On July 10, 1906, the Methodist pastors of Altoona held a meeting at the Eighth Avenue M.E. Church to discuss the needs of the expanding Italian community. The ministers agreed that an Italian Church was needed to provide that community with spiritual guidance and with the tools necessary to accomplish their Americanization. That gathering led to the establishment of the Altoona Evangelization Society and the creation of the Italian M.E. Church of Altoona.⁵

The Altoona Evangelization Society, on October 9, 1906, deposited \$1,000 on a property located on the northwest corner of Eighth Avenue and Sixth Street. This was the future home of the Italian M.E. Church of Altoona. It was at this time that Rev. Geraldini retired and was replaced by Angelo Bonacci, a transfer from the Austin Conference.⁶ To accommodate the increasing number of Italian Methodists, Rev. Bonacci moved the services from the Market House to the basement of the Fifth Avenue Church. This was obviously intended as a temporary solution, for the Italian Church was already under construction.⁷

On June 15, 1907, Sadie J. Sheffer was employed as the Deaconess of the Italian Mission. She proved to be an invaluable asset to the mission and church for more than thirty years. Miss Sheffer was an outstanding Christian leader who unselfishly dedicated her life to the improvement of Altoona's immigrant families. She played a key role in the successful establishment and ministry of the Italian M.E. Church in Altoona.⁸

Sadie Sheffer was born to Amos and Rebecca Ilgenfritz Sheffer on July 1, 1867, near Carlisle, Pennsylvania. She had a sister, Lillian, and two brothers, Charles and Harry. By the late 1880's, the Sheffer family had moved to Williamsport, at 844 Erie Avenue, and attended that city's Grace M.E. Church. Amos worked as a general contractor and provided an average lifestyle for his family. As parents, Amos and Rebecca instructed their children in the discipline and primacy of Christianity. Lillian also became a deaconess in the Methodist Episcopal Church, and the boys became successful businessmen who supported their sisters' ecclesiastical efforts in word and deed. This was a home filled with Christian love and kindness.⁹

Sadie began her formal religious studies in 1898, at the Lucy Webb Hayes Training School in Washington, D.C. This institution offered a two-year program to prepare women for deaconess positions in Methodist churches and missions. Upon her graduation in 1900, Miss Sheffer was assigned to the South Market Church in Newark, New Jersey. This was the beginning of her lifelong work with Italian missions. Here she was exposed to the tragic conditions of immigrant life and came to realize the magnitude of the work to be done.

Now motivated to dedicate her life to the betterment of immigrant peoples, Sadie was transferred to the Altoona Italian Mission in 1907. There she focused on the immediate needs of the people. To supply needed clothing, she conducted sewing classes for the Italian women and children. She also initiated a program to distribute used coats and other clothing to the children of the neighborhood. Not wanting to neglect the deeper needs of the community, she cultivated the spiritual lives of the children by directing a Bible School on the weekends. In short, Miss Sheffer became an irreplaceable force against poverty and ignorance among the Italian immigrants.

Extremely versatile and well-rounded, Sadie believed that musical and other cultural skills were necessary for a complete education. In 1913, she and several other local women raised \$200 to purchase a piano from the American Piano Company. While the piano was used primarily for Bible School classes, Miss Sheffer also gave piano lessons to several of the Italian children.

Sadie Sheffer finally retired at the age of sixty-nine in 1937. She enjoyed nine years of retirement at the Methodist's Bancroft-Taylor Rest Home in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, before her death on January 21, 1946. Miss Sheffer was a sterling example of charity and kindness whose memory still lives in the hearts of those who knew her. She served a variety of rolls under several pastoral leaders and was, perhaps, the single most important force in the continuing ministry of the Italian Methodist Episcopal Mission and Church.

On April 1, 1909, Rev. Angelo Bonacci was replaced by Rev. Joseph Paciarelli. Born in Rome, Italy, May 15, 1866, Joseph was the youngest child of Francisco and Anna Maria Paciarelli. The Paciarelli family was quite wealthy and owned vast estates throughout Italy. Their children, as those of most affluent Italians of the period, were educated in private Catholic institutions and exposed to Christian doctrines at an early age.¹⁰

Joseph Paciarelli advanced quite brilliantly through these schools to graduate at the top of his class. He then entered the Jesuit's Rome University, earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree and appeared to be on the road to becoming a cardinal. It was then that Father Paciarelli became acquainted with Rev. William Burt, a chaplain at the military headquarters at Rome, who exposed him to the doctrines of Methodism. At the age of 29, in 1895, the young priest subsequently renounced his affiliation with the Catholic Church and entered the Methodist Theological School.

Directed by Rev. Burt, Joseph quickly met the requirements of the school and received his diploma in June, 1897. Although he stated this was one of the greatest moments in his life, it came at a price. Outraged by his abandonment of Catholicism, his family severed all ties with him. Nonetheless, Rev. Paciarelli managed to regain happiness in his life. Soon after his graduation, he married Josephine, daughter of Ermenegildo Piacentini, one of the first converts to Protestantism as a result of Italy's unification. In 1867, in response to a growing unification that included almost all the country except for Rome, the Pope forbade Catholic participation in the political life of the nation. A breach of this edict resulted in excommunication from the Catholic Church, and the Piacentini family had already involved themselves with Protestant reform. Together, Joseph and Josephine continued this legacy.

On July 5, 1897, Rev. and Mrs. Paciarelli were sent to Palermo, a mission field the Methodists considered barbarous and uncivilized, to Christianize the natives. Great accomplishments were reported during their two year stay there -- where they celebrated the birth of their first child, Georgia. Because of their success, Joseph and Josephine were relocated in 1899 to continue their holy mission in Spinazolla.

The Paciarellis faced a great challenge at Spinazolla, a city saturated with crime and malice. Joseph's services were rewarded with an abundance of followers during their five years there -- and Josephine was blessed with two more children, Geneva and Germania. Immediately following Germania's birth, Joseph expressed the desire to preach in America.

In July, 1904, the Paciarelli family was permitted to move to Buffalo, New York. The growing number of Italian immigrants there needed both a leader and a place of worship. This was to be a

temporary assignment, and Joseph was expected to return to Italy in four years. The Paciarellis remained there five years, however, and established St. Paul's Methodist Episcopal Church as a Protestant house of worship for their Italian brothers. As a result of Joseph's efforts, the denomination recognized the needs and potential of Italian Methodism in America and released him from his obligation to return to Italy.

In answer to a call from the Altoona Evangelization Society, Rev. Paciarelli agreed to relocate to Altoona to help with Italian problems similar to those in Buffalo. In April 1909, he replaced Angelo Bonacci and occupied the basement of the Italian Methodist Church. Although the main sanctuary was not completed, he began to conduct services and classes in the building for the Italian immigrants.

Once completed, the Italian M.E. Church was a one story building thirty by fifty-eight feet, with a finished basement. The parsonage was located next door and, in 1910, had a rental value of \$18.00 per month. Although the building was rather small in comparison to other local churches, it demonstrated great love and began to meet the enormous needs within the community.¹¹

The first service in the main sanctuary was conducted on February 17, 1910. Bishop Cranston gave the initial oration at the opening ceremonies in English, and it was interpreted by Rev. H. Wright. To accommodate all present, the hymns alternated between English and Italian.¹² After the formal dedication, subsequent worship services were conducted entirely in Italian. To further the education of the children, however, deaconess Sheffer conducted Sunday School in English. Working together, Rev. Paciarelli and Miss Sheffer transformed the Italian M.E. Church into an institution of hope for the Italian immigrants.

In addition to his ministerial chores, Rev. Paciarelli and his daughter Germania instructed night school in the church's basement. Joseph designed these classes to teach Italians English and American history, as all foreigners needed such knowledge to obtain their naturalization papers. Rev. Paciarelli, then, became a force in the political advancement of the Italian people as well.

The early years of the Altoona Methodist Episcopal Church were rather successful. During Rev. Paciarelli's stay, the immigrants increased steadily in number. Although wages were low, jobs were abundant. The Italians worked long hours and increased their economic resources. As financial improvement permitted the support of larger families, the number of children in Altoona's Italian community increased dramatically. The church became a necessary institution for the education of the children and the spiritual guidance of the Italian people.

Although Rev. Paciarelli cared deeply for the Altoona believers, his services were needed elsewhere. In June 1916, he received a call from Baltimore. The Italian community in that city, as earlier in Buffalo and Altoona, needed a formidable individual to establish a prosperous mission for its immigrants. Joseph, therefore, left the Altoona Methodist Episcopal Church in 1916 to continue his work in Baltimore. During the next nine years, he reported a number of successes in that city. Due to poor health, he retired from the ministry in 1925. On February 24, 1938, his thirteen year battle with

mental confusion and physical illness came to an end. His death was mourned by many, for his life had been dedicated to the establishment of prosperous Italian work in three American cities.

Joseph Paciarelli was replaced in Altoona in 1916 by Rev. Nicola De Stefano. Born in Montalbono, Sicily, Nicola was the son of a dentist. Although he had planned to follow his father into the field of medicine, his plans were disrupted by a clear calling to the ministry, and he came to America at the age of eighteen to further his education.¹³

Upon Nicola's arrival in this country, he entered West Virginia Wesleyan College. He continued his education at the Boston University School of Theology, where he earned a Doctor of Divinity degree. Driven by a keen mind and a dedicated spirit, he became an esteemed leader in Italian missionary work.

As a result of Rev. Paciarelli's transfer, the Italian Church in Altoona faced a difficult time of transition. When a suitable replacement could not be found, Rev. De Stefano agreed to fill the vacancy temporarily. His stay at that position continued for four years.

While engaged in Altoona, Nicola continued the efforts initiated by Joseph Paciarelli. These included the night classes and several other pastoral duties. Although his credentials were impeccable and he performed his ministerial duties admirably, Rev. De Stefano probably could not have maintained the work at the level it had reached without the presence and efforts of Sadie Sheffer. During this prolonged transition period, it was deaconess Sheffer who offered the stability necessary for continuing prosperity. The unified efforts of Miss Sheffer and Rev. De Stefano insured the survival of the church until a permanent minister could be found.

The United States entered the First World War in 1917. Many of Altoona's Italian males joined the military because it offered an alternative to the wretched coal mine and railroad work. In response, the remaining Italians looked more and more to the church for support and guidance during this time of loss and separation from loved ones. Rev. De Stefano and Miss Sheffer gave material support, including food and clothing, as well as spiritual guidance. Such conditions underscored the importance of finding a permanent minister to continue the work.

When a replacement was finally secured in 1919, Rev. De Stefano moved on to minister in several other churches having significant Italian constituencies and problems similar to those in Altoona. He served at one of these locations, The Church of the Redeemer in Syracuse, New York, for twenty years before his retirement in 1949. The De Stefanos moved to Florida following his retirement, and at age 70 Nicola became the minister of the Methodist Church at Lake Harbor. He retired "for good" in 1962 and died two years later.

Nicola De Stefano's replacement, Rev. Ugo Crivelli, was born in Milan, Italy, on August 14, 1881. He accepted the Lord Jesus in Italy and became a born-again child of God. He met his future wife, Esther Rossi, when he came to the United States as a youth to preach the word of Christ.

Together they had two children, Mary and Peter. Esther, however, became seriously ill following her second pregnancy and was never completely cured of those ailments.¹⁴

Sadie Sheffer welcomed the Crivellis to Altoona with open arms. Due to Esther's poor physical condition, Sadie was also to assume a significant role in the upbringing of Mary and Peter -- a role she apparently filled with great success. As the children matured, both became actively involved with the church and Sunday School, and Peter served for many years as the church pianist.¹⁵

Rev. Crivelli was a gifted writer and a master of his "Milanese language." He had several articles published in the weekly periodical La Voce, an Italian paper that dealt with happenings in the Methodist Church, and was an invaluable source of information for the elderly Italian-speaking members. He also excelled in the fine arts. An exceptionally gifted painter, Ugo produced a multitude of oil portraits. A lover of music, he maintained an extensive collection of classical records. In addition, although he played no musical instrument, he became an active member of the Altoona Civic Symphony association.

While the First World War came to an end during Rev. Crivelli's tenure in Altoona, its effects upon the local economy continued. The coal industry, which fueled the war efforts, prospered. The railroads, necessary for the transportation of coal and other war materials, boomed as never before. As the Altoona Italian Methodist Episcopal Church property bordered that of the Pennsylvania Railroad, the congregation couldn't help feeling caught up in the excitement. Many of the church's members were employed by the coal or railroad companies, and economic conditions improved throughout the immigrant community. Although Ugo Crivelli watched his congregation grow financially and numerically, the times of economic prosperity were soon to end.

In 1929 began the Great Depression. Like many other institutions, the Altoona Evangelization Society found itself burdened with financial difficulties. The organization with ultimate authority over the Italian Church ministry and property, this society was also involved in several other significant Altoona projects. As times worsened, this arm of the church was forced to scrutinize all of its operations. While prosperous in many ways, the Italian Church and the immigrant community had never really achieved equality with the rest of the city. [Although Rev. Crivelli had been serving for ten years, for example, he still received the minimum annual salary of \$1500.] Now hardships had surfaced from which the work would never recover, and the era of decline had begun.¹⁶

Rev. Crivelli left the Altoona Italian Church in 1932 and moved to Hillsville [near New Castle, Pennsylvania, and within the Erie Conference] to pastor a local congregation. Several years after his retirement, he returned to Altoona and became a member of the Broad Avenue Methodist Church. After 79 years of faithful service to the Lord, Ugo Crivelli died on August 15, 1960.

Rev. Crivelli was succeeded by Pasquale D'Elia, who was to be the final pastor of the Italian Church, in 1932. Pasquale was born in Tarlizzi, Italy, on August 3, 1875. He received a traditional education and served for several years in the Italian army. No stranger to poverty and impoverished living conditions, he came to America in 1903 and found employment in Pennsylvania as a general laborer.¹⁷

Aware of the benefits of an education, Pasquale attended Colgate and Allegheny Colleges. Following graduation, he was installed as pastor of the Italian Methodist Church at Hillsville, Pennsylvania. It was there that Rev. D'Elia married Angelina Profeta on July 18, 1915. Angelina proved to be a devoted wife and mother of seven children: Guido, Mary, Blanche, Gene, Dante, David and Donald.

When the D'Elia family moved to Altoona in 1932, they faced many challenges. The Great Depression was at its peak, and jobs were scarce. Many members of the Altoona Italian Church had already relocated to larger cities in the hope of finding employment. One of the new pastor's first priorities was to take an active role in locating positions for several members of the congregation.¹⁸

In addition, Mrs. D'Elia performed a vital leadership role during their years in Altoona. In August, when Rev. D'Elia was often severely afflicted with hay fever, Angelina would deliver his sermons to the congregation. She was also responsible for creating the church's first adult choir and Woman's Aid society, an organization concerned with the material needs of the community.¹⁹

Although Sadie Sheffer and Mrs. D'Elia worked long and hard to combat the economic devastation caused by the Depression, it became increasingly difficult to meet the needs of the community. Once again poverty spread through the immigrant community, as many regressed to the destitute levels of pre-War and pre-Mission days. Growing older, and saddened by what was happening, deaconess Sheffer felt forced to end her years of Christian service and informed Rev. D'Elia of her retirement plans in 1937.

Miss Sheffer was replaced by deaconess Anna K. Nestor. Born in New York City in 1882, Miss Nestor was educated at the National Training School in Kansas City. Although warmly welcomed into the Altoona Italian Church, she could never replaced the indomitable Sadie Sheffer.



One of the few known Altoona photographs of Anna Nestor, shown here with an unknown child.

Anna, in contrast to Sadie, was a shy, reserved woman who rarely expressed her feelings. Her acts of charity, however, revealed deep compassion. Miss Nestor made it possible, for example, for youth member Rose Mollica to travel to Lycoming College and attend a Carrie Barge House Party, a Methodist summer camp for girls that focused on recreational activities and crafts. She also specialized in making Raggedy Ann dolls for the local children. In general, she was a special woman whose services were greatly appreciated.²⁰

Anna Nestor remained at the Italian Church until it closed, and then was transferred to the Neighborhood Center in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. After thirty-eight years of service in parish and community centers throughout the east coast, she retired to the Bancroft-Taylor Home in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, and died at the age of 86 on September 19, 1968. Although there were no known surviving relatives, she was greatly appreciated and remembered by the multitude of people she helped throughout her life.²¹

During Rev. D'Elia's pastorate, but because of circumstances beyond his control, membership numbers of the Altoona Italian Church declined. Church records indicate that marriages and baptisms remained at an all-time low from 1935 to 1942. Although these times of economic difficulty increased participation in many religious activities, they caused a decrease in the monies donated for such programs. The Altoona Evangelization Society recognized the dual problems of decreasing finances and membership, and organized a committee to investigate. Unfortunately, these actions took several years to accomplish.²²

In an attempt to save the Italian Methodist Episcopal Church, the Altoona Evangelization Society took a \$4,000 mortgage against the church property. In addition, the society lessened the amounts of insurance policies it held on its properties. These were attempts to satisfy pressing obligations to the Second National Bank of Altoona. Although the debts incurred by the ministry to the Italians increased continually throughout the 1930's, these debts were not the Italian Church's only problem.

The United States increased immigration regulations in the 1920's and 30's, and the number of Italians permitted to migrate to America was greatly reduced. As fewer immigrants came to Altoona during these years, the Italian congregation grew older and more assimilated into the larger community. There was a sense in which the Italian Church needed fresh immigrants to justify its existence. The institution created to be an agent against poverty, prejudice and illiteracy had completed its work.

In addition, the Catholic Church played a major role in the decline of the Italian Methodist Episcopal Church. For several reasons, significant numbers of the Methodist Italians began to rejoin the Catholic Church. When the immigrants first came to America, they did not speak English or appreciate the complexity of denominationalism. Methodism was the only local religion to minister in the Italian language, and doctrinal issues were of little concern or understanding. As the foreigners learned the English language and began to recognize, with not a little help from the Catholic Church, the differences between Methodism and the religion of their native land, many chose to return to their Catholic heritage and tradition.

Nineteenth century Italy had but one church, and all members of the community attended at the nearest place of worship. Unaware of the multitude of religious organizations in America, many immigrants simply continued this practice. Any observed differences in polity or practice were often dismissed as "the way things are done in America." Although hundreds became official members of the Methodist Church, a significant number did not completely abandon their previous habits and beliefs. It was not uncommon, for example, to find members of the Italian Methodist Episcopal Church using rosaries. And so for many Italians, Methodism was merely a transitional institution.²³

The loss of several influential leaders also crippled the Italian Church. The departure of deaconess Sadie Sheffer in 1937 left a permanent void. Although Anna Nestor performed to the best of her ability, she was unable to offer the stability and leadership that Miss Sheffer had provided. In addition, Angelina D'Elia, wife of Rev. Pasquale D'Elia, passed away in 1940. The force behind the creation of several church organizations, she apparently was necessary for their continued success. The loss of these two women fatally injured the unofficial infrastructure of the Italian work.²⁴

The Board of Missions, however, was not willing to give up the Italian Mission easily. The Altoona Evangelization Society owned several rental properties. In attempt to consolidate its efforts and to save the Italian Church, the society sold two such properties for \$1600 on June 12, 1939. This and other efforts proved to be only temporary measures merely postponing the inevitable.²⁵

The Altoona Evangelization Society was also responsible for establishing other Methodist churches in the area, including Jaggard Memorial. Located in a growing, upper middle class area on Altoona's expanding fringe, Jaggard Memorial had been a successful endeavor until this time. Economic conditions were now forcing it, too, to struggle to survive. The debts of these two churches (i.e., the Italian Church and Jaggard Memorial) forced the society to take drastic steps to prevent the closure of both institutions.

On December 1, 1941, District Superintendent Emory Hartman proposed the sale of the Italian Methodist Episcopal Church. Its decreasing numbers and the seeming completion of the task for which it was founded (and the prospects for growth and eventual financial stability at Jaggard Memorial) made the Italian Church the most logical property to be sacrificed for the betterment of Altoona Methodism as a whole. Reluctantly, the society managers agreed.

On September 15, 1941, Superintendent Hartman had already corresponded with the Pennsylvania Railroad expressing a possible desire to sell the Italian Church property. The society, he stated, understood that the railroad planned to widen the tracks at the corner of the church property, and that this would severely reduce the value of the location for religious services. He proposed that the railroad purchase the property for \$35,000, an offer that was not well-received by the Pennsylvania Railroad.²⁶

In response to Rev. Hartman, real estate agent W.W. Mayer stated that the proposed figure was completely out of the question. He further contended that the Pennsylvania Railroad had no need for or interest in the property, and would consider purchasing it only as a display of good will toward the

Methodist Church. He indicated that he would not consider recommending the property to the company for any figure over \$10,000, and that his communication was not to be interpreted as a commitment to purchase at any price.²⁷

Several other letters were exchanged, but the Pennsylvania Railroad would not budge on its offer of \$10,000. Although the Altoona Evangelization Society was keenly disappointed, the sale of the Italian property for the stated price was finalized on October 23, 1942. The saga of the Altoona Italian Methodist Church had come to an end.

Now 62 years old, Pasquale D'Elia retired when the church was sold. "The work to which he had given his life was now assumed by other Methodist Churches as they ministered to the whole community without nationalistic distinctions."²⁸ He became an active member of the Simpson Methodist Church, and his presence there enhanced that congregation's life and ministry. He enjoyed fifteen years of retirement and spending time with his children before his death on May 16, 1967. His death was a loss to the Methodist community, for his life of teaching and leadership had affected many. It was he, more than any other individual, who was responsible for the successful integration of the Italians into mainstream Altoona Methodism.

Following the closing of the Italian Methodist Church, the congregation and church furnishings were dispersed to several area churches. Nearby Fifth Avenue Methodist received a plurality of the remaining members. Being only a few blocks from the old site, it offered easy access for the Italian Church's elderly members and was the church of many of their non-Italian friends and neighbors. While there was some prejudice displayed over the incoming Italian members, mostly among the older generation, it was minimal and accepted as a reflection of general societal denial of reality and fear of change. In time, all the Italians were accepted by and assimilated into the Methodist congregations of their choice.²⁹

Not only members, but also articles and artifacts from the Italian Church distributed themselves throughout Altoona. The baptismal font was secured for use at the Fifty-Eighth Street Church. Fifth Avenue Church received a piano, bought by Miss Sheffer for kindergarten work, as an addition to their Sunday School. They also received the main pulpit from the Italian sanctuary. Such transactions seemed to symbolize the acceptance of the Italian people. The Italian Church did not cease to exist; it became a phase in the evolution of Altoona Methodism. Nor was the assimilation limited to Altoona, as the church pews and several other items went to the Juniata College Chapel in Huntingdon.

The Altoona Italian Methodist Church was not a failure. Although it declined in the 1940's, it had served its purpose efficiently and with compassion. Its stated mission to "Americanize and Christianize the foreign speaking peoples" had been accomplished. The Italian people of Altoona became literate, culturally aware people -- and at a much quicker rate than could have been expected. The Italian work was not ineffective, it was overly successful.

The dictionary defines a relic as "something that survived the test of time; especially an object or custom whose original cultural environment has disappeared." The progress of the Italian community

transformed the Italian Methodist Church into a relic. Although the institution did not survive physically, its spirit lived within each member and continued to influence and inform the Methodist presence in Altoona. Its original cultural environment had disappeared, but it remained a part of every member. The Altoona Italian Methodist Church did not disintegrate, but it became a cherished relic in the story of American Methodism.

END NOTES

1. Homer C. Knox, History of Methodism in Altoona, Pennsylvania, Altoona: 1909, 163.
2. Altoona Evangelization Society, Minutes 1907-1943, United Methodist Archives at Lycoming College, 1.
3. Frederick E. Maser, Methodism in Central Pennsylvania 1771-1969, Lebanon: 1971, 176.
4. James E. Ewing, History of the City of Altoona and Blair County, Altoona: 1888, 222.
5. Altoona Evangelization Society, op. cit., 2.
6. "Altoona District Superintendent's Report," Central Pennsylvania Conference Journal, 1907, 61.
7. Maser, op. cit., 176.
8. "Church Begun in Present Century," The Mirror, Altoona: 25 July 1934, 6.
9. "Sheffer," Biographical File, United Methodist Archives at Lycoming College.
10. "Joseph Paciarelli" [obituary], Central Pennsylvania Conference Journal, 1938, 372.
11. Knox, op. cit., 161.
12. "Program of the Dedicatory Service," Italian Methodist Episcopal Church: 17 February 1910, United Methodist Archives at Lycoming College.
13. "Nicola De Stefano" [obituary], United Methodist Archives at Lycoming College.
14. "Ugo Crivelli" [obituary], Erie Conference Journal, 1961, 596.
15. Rose Mollica Lack, letter dated 20 October 1993, United Methodist Archives at Lycoming College.
16. Altoona Evangelization Society, op. cit., 137.
17. "Pasquale D'Elia" [obituary], Central Pennsylvania Conference Journal, 1967, 312.
18. Gene D'Elia, interview dated 26 October 1993, United Methodist Archives at Lycoming College.
19. Mary D'Elia Stango, interview dated 26 October 1993, United Methodist Archives at Lycoming College.
20. Lack, op. cit.
21. "Anna K. Nestor" [obituary], United Methodist Archives at Lycoming College.
22. Altoona Evangelization Society, op. cit., 150A.
23. Amedea Mollica, interview dated 26 October 1993, United Methodist Archives at Lycoming College.
24. Stango, op. cit.
25. Altoona Evangelization Society, op. cit., 168.
26. Emory Hartman [letter dated 15 September 1491], Altoona Evangelization Society File, United Methodist Archives at Lycoming College.
27. W.W. Mayer [letter dated 12 December 1941], Altoona Evangelization Society File, United Methodist Archives at Lycoming College.
28. "Pasquale D'Elia" [obituary], Central Pennsylvania Conference Journal, 1967, 312.
29. Gene D'Elia, op. cit.

Appendix I: Other Intra-Conference Home Missions

The Altoona Italian Methodist Church was not the only project within the Central Pennsylvania Conference involving deaconesses and home missions. Over the years and with varying degrees of success, several such rural and urban ministries have been sponsored. The most prominent and enduring of these outreaches occurred in Harrisburg, and its history is told in The Neighborhood Center: An Urban Love Story by Robert H. Terry (1992). Below are two accounts preserved in the Conference Archives of other projects similar to the Altoona Italian work. The first is from a Sunbury District Survey booklet that was presented to the 1918 annual conference, and the second is an undated manuscript written sometime after 1941.

MISSION OF WOMAN'S HOME MISSIONARY SOCIETY HAZLETON AND BERWICK

The Anthracite Slavonic Mission Home is conducting classes in the ten following places: West Berwick, Freeland, Jeddo, Hollywood, Cranberry, Stockton, Humboldt, Beaver Brook, and two parts of Hazleton.

Among the industrial classes, sewing predominates. The largest at present has an average attendance of ninety. An opportunity is given the children of the Hazleton Mission to take piano lessons in the home. Three classes of girls and two of boys in or around Hazleton are knitting for the Red Cross. The boys at Humboldt are organized into a boys' club. In connection with the various industrial classes, especial attention is given to memorizing important portions of Scripture.

The kindergarten located on Twentieth Street, Hazleton, which is largely a Slavic center, is proving a success. In the new Sunday School held in the kindergarten room every boy and girl is Slovak or Polish. The Beaver Brook Sunday School is now averaging fifty in attendance.

At West Berwick, cooking, sewing and religious classes are conducted. A unique feature is the loom where the foreign children and their mothers weave rugs and carpets.

Six women are thus working in "this portion of the Lord's vineyard," having at present an enrollment of six hundred in their industrial classes and one hundred seventy in their religious. Nearly all except at Beaver Brook are Slavs. They also do relief work of various kinds, and frequently place the Bible in homes where it has never been read before.

Miss Edith Park,
Superintendent

THE METHODIST MISSION IN HAZLETON

The Methodist Mission in Hazleton, Pennsylvania, was started by Miss Glenna Ford and a Miss Van. They lived in a dwelling at First and Alter Streets and had their meetings in homes and in the Mission Church at Diamond Avenue and Alter Street. Their kindergarten and clubs were held in a vacant storefront at Twentieth and Alter Streets. They also held services at Harwood in a church which was owned by the Primitive Methodist Church. Scout meetings were held in rooms at the Harwood and Hollywood Schools. All this was in 1925 or 1926.

In 1926 I accepted part time employment as a scout leader in Hazleton, and at Harwood and Hollywood in the evenings. I worked for the Woman's Society as a part time Boys' Worker from 1926 to 1930. In 1930 I accepted full time work and remained in that position until 1941.

The work grew steadily during 1927 and 1928. In 1929, a building known as the Blodgett Community House was built at the corner of Twentieth and Peace Streets. It was funded by a large amount of money given by Gertrude Blodgett in honor of her brother Harry Blodgett, for whom the building was named.

The staff was then increased to five workers: Miss Helen Miller, Miss Marjorie Munick, Miss Van, Miss Dorothy Sittle, and Miss Glenna Ford as Superintendent. Other workers throughout the years included Miss Ruth Exner, Miss Addie Toops, Miss Sonya Ford, Miss Marjorie Harton, Miss Frances Calkins, Miss Barth, Miss Dorothy Gage, Miss Pearl Freema, Miss Edith Rohrer, Mr. Leach, Mr. Dwight Haughan, Miss Melba Sue Ward, and Miss March. Miss Grace Bate accepted the Superintendency in 1935. At the peak of the operation there were eight workers employed at one time.

A double company house in Harwood and a single home in Hollywood were both purchased for use as Community Houses. At first, only one half of the house in Harwood was used for classes. As the work grew, we took over the other half of the house and added a sizeable room to the back of the building to accommodate larger groups. In 1939, a small block building was built on the main street of Hollywood. Because it was difficult to reach in the winter time, the single home there was then sold.

At both Harwood and Hollywood, classes were held for all ages -- kindergarten through adult. There were also clubs which were held during the week. Kindergarten was held each morning -- Monday through Friday. The classes and clubs were held 4-6 pm for the children and 7-9 pm for the young people and adults. Sundays were busy days -- Sunday School was held at Harwood at 9 am and at Hollywood at 2 pm, and vespers were held at the Blodgett Community House at 7:30 pm. One building had a small gym, which was in use 4-10 pm Monday through Friday and 9 am - 5 pm on Saturdays. The work continued for many years and included many nationalities.

As time went on, the Catholic priests saw what the Methodists were accomplishing by having Community Centers. They then opened their own in the Hazleton area and forbid their people in Harwood to attend classes in our Community House. Our work in Harwood was closed after a while, and eventually so was the work in Hazleton.

The Hollywood work is still being carried on, and much good is being accomplished there. Since there has never been a church of any denomination at that place, there is a great need for the work to carry on.

Mr. Edgar A. Kessel
617 W. Third Street
Hazleton, Penna.

Appendix II: Miss Sadie J. Sheffer

Sadie J. Sheffer, who served for thirty years at the Altoona Italian Mission and to whom this edition of THE CHRONICLE has been dedicated, is representative of all who served as deaconesses in the Methodist Episcopal, United Brethren and Evangelical traditions within United Methodism. Many women raised in Central Pennsylvania served as deaconesses, and many deaconesses served in Central Pennsylvania. Miss Sheffer stands out partly because she alone was privileged to serve for so long within her home conference.

Older Altoonans with knowledge of the Italian Mission remember Sadie Sheffer more than any other person, event or circumstance. She lived in the apartment house still standing on the northwest corner of Eighth Avenue and Twelfth Street, across from Trinity United Methodist (which, at that time, was called First United Brethren) Church. Children would accompany her each day as she walked the six blocks from her room to the Mission.

She was unselfish. Sadie taught sewing classes for women and girls, and she spent much of her time and money making and repairing clothes for others. The sewing machine she used is now in the Santello Funeral Home, where there is a display room of photographs, artifacts and Altoona memorabilia of all sorts.

She loved unconditionally. Sadie always saw that "her children" were clothed, and they were "her children" by being in the neighborhood -- regardless of what church they or their parents attended. She knew that the Catholic priests encouraged their young parishioners to make one last trip to the Methodist Mission to get all the clothes they could before they were confirmed in the Catholic Church and forbidden to frequent the Mission any more.



Sadie Sheffer (second row, holding roses) at her April 17, 1937, retirement luncheon given at Grace M.E. Church by her brother Charles (front row, second from right) of Watsonstown -- President of Dewart Milk Products Company and a director of both the Methodist Home for Aged at Tyrone and the Methodist Training Camp at Newton Hamilton -- who often saw that the Mission had milk and ice cream treats. Charles and her other brother Harry (a businessman in New York and various Susquehanna Valley communities) also regularly provided Christmas gifts for "Sadie's children."