

## **Pine Grove Methodist Episcopal Church (1881-2004)**

The 2004 Annual Conference formally approved closing Pine Grove Church in the Chambersburg District. Located just east of Wells Tannery in Fulton County, the 1881 building replaced a 12'x18' log structure that stood on private lands about 300 yards to the west. While the closing of this small rural church will have no major impact on the Central Pennsylvania Annual Conference, its passing is noted as representative of all the other similar churches whose doors have closed without article or fanfare.

The church is the people of the congregation and not the building in which they happen to worship, and so the story of this church is told using a particular family. While the Clippinger family was selected because local persons of that surname were directly involved with the 1881 erection and 2004 closing of the building, they are representative of all who have embraced and supported Wells Valley Methodism over the years.

One of the items typically passed to the conference archives when a church is closed is the minute book of the local trustees. For Pine Grove Church, the first entry in the trustee records is as follows.

*Trustees (having been appointed by the third quarterly conference of the conference year of 1880) met at John W. Johnston's November 16, 1880. The board of trustees consists of the following persons: W.H. Spangler, J.W. Johnston, George White, Miles Greenland and A.F. Baker. The first business was the election of W.H. Spangler as president and A.F. Baker as secretary. After considerable discussion in reference to size of church it was moved by A.F. Baker that the size should be 28x42x16 feet high, which motion was unanimously carried. It was then moved that the secretary should draw up 1/2 dozen subscription papers to be placed in the hands of W.H. Spangler, Miles Greenland, J.W. Johnston, W.S. Piper, George White and John Griffin. J.W. Johnston was appointed as a committee to wait on Rev. Clippinger and ascertain what he would contribute to the erection of a church. On motion, adjourned to meet at call of chairman.*

*A.F. Baker, secretary*

Subsequent minutes indicate that Rev. Clippinger contributed twenty dollars, no small sum for an itinerant minister in 1880. But who was this Rev. Clippinger that was the only person singled out to be approached for moral and financial support for the new church building? The following paragraphs tell the story of Rev. Clippinger, and they also reveal the hardships that the early 1880's were to bring to the Clippingers and others in the Wells Valley.

William A. Clippinger (1842-1883) was born in Franklin County, in the Path Valley village of Willow Hill. When he was eight years old, the family moved west, across Tuscarora mountain and Sideling hill, into the Wells

Valley of Fulton County – his parents Jacob Clippinger (1803-1873) and Elizabeth K. Wolf Clippinger (1806-1888) being the ancestors of the numerous Clippinger descendants that still occupy the area.

Having developed an interest in books at an early age, William eventually sought a more thorough education than was available in the immediate area. Considering preparing to practice law, he enrolled in the Rainsburg Academy in Bedford County. This short-lived school, whose impressive building is still standing and being restored into a home, was established under control of the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1855. Because many of its students and much of its support came from the South, financial difficulties associated with the Civil War caused it to be sold in 1867. But it was during a great revival there in 1864 that many students, including William A. Clippinger, were thoroughly converted.

Feeling that God was calling him into full-time Christian work, William began to prepare for the ministry. In 1865, two significant events occurred: he received a license to preach from the Rainsburg quarterly conference, and he united in marriage with Emma Virginia Smith (1843-1883). Mrs. Clippinger was born in the Cumberland Valley of Bedford County, and her family moved to the Rainsburg area when she was fourteen. The Smith family were devoted Christians, and their younger daughter Jennie Elizabeth (1857-1883) would also marry a Methodist preacher from our conference – Rev. John L. Leilich (1854-1905).

William served as junior preacher on the Saxton charge in 1868, and was recommended by that charge for reception into the itinerancy the following year. Received into the conference in 1869, he served various charges with marked success. With his aged mother living in Wells Tannery and many other Clippinger relatives in the area, he undoubtedly made return visits to the area – and probably preached in the two Methodist log church buildings in the valley: the one near Pine Grove on private land, and the one near Enid on land deeded to the denomination in 1821. It may even have been Rev. Clippinger who, being familiar with other structures around the conference, encouraged the congregation at Pine Grove to secure land and erect a frame building appropriate for worship. And so it was no surprise that the local believers turned to their respected ministerial son Rev. William A. Clippinger for the moral and financial support necessary to construct their 1881 building.

What was a surprise, however, was the tragedy that was to befall the community and the Clippingers less than two years later – immediately following the close of the March 1883 annual conference. In the days before proper sewage disposal, pure drinking water and vaccinations, diseases like typhoid fever were more common – and a single carrier of the bacteria could start localized mini-epidemics. This is apparently what occurred within the extended Clippinger family. While it's not possible to reconstruct the exact

timing and manner in which the disease was spread, certain events and dates can be given.

Mrs. Clippinger traveled to nurse her sister Jennie, the Mrs. Rev. John L. Leilich, until she died of typhoid fever in the parsonage at Blain on March 31, 1883. The Leilichs had been married less than three years, and Mrs. Clippinger's sister was only twenty-six years old. Mrs. Clippinger died April 24, and Rev. Clippinger passed away on May 2. For the last few weeks they lay severely stricken and in and out of consciousness in separate bedrooms – unable to console each other, while friends did their best to make them comfortable. Attending William Clippinger when he died was his long-time friend Rev. Dr. John W. Leckie MD – the Rainsburg pastor who had united William and Emma in marriage, and who had taken up the study and practice of medicine when his voice failed and he could no longer preach.

Apparently, however, the tragedy had not yet run its course. Two sons of Rev. Clippinger's brother, Wilson Montgomery Clippinger (1845-1933) would yet succumb – Charlie E. Clippinger on August 11, and Willie A. Clippinger on October 15. These two boys are buried in the Wells Valley Methodist Cemetery. William and Emma also had a son, for Rev. Clippinger's obituary talks of their "only living child, a son about fourteen years old." Research has not been able to determine what happened to him after his parents' death, or even his given name.

But even such trials could not dampen the enthusiasm generated by the new building. Though Wells Valley was at the extreme southwest corner of the very large area covered by the Three Springs circuit, the work prospered. In 1889, the sister church near Enid was encouraged to follow suit and replace its log structure with a modern frame chapel – and in 1979 that building was moved across the road where it continues as the Wells Valley United Methodist Church.

Steady progress continued at Pine Grove for over 100 years. New pews, arranged to create a center aisle, were purchased in 1921. The original kerosene lamps were replaced by gas-under-pressure lights with mantles, and then by electric lights powered by a 32-volt Delco generator, before the Rural Electric Cooperative finally arrived in 1939.

Pine Grove experienced gradual numerical growth until 1955, following the pattern of Methodism in general, when it reached its peak membership of 135. Correspondingly, that decade also witnessed the three most significant improvements to the building. In 1951, the ceiling was lowered and the sanctuary was paneled. In 1956, two Sunday School rooms were added to the rear of the structure. In 1958, a vestibule with rest rooms was added to the front.

In 1981, a membership of 36 celebrated the building's centennial. While the numbers were not what they once had been, the spirit was good and the people were optimistic about their prospects. Soon, however, it appeared that realistic concerns about lack of growth and stewardship of resources

needed to be addressed. The first step occurred when the district superintendent conducted a congregational meeting following the January 13, 1991, worship service. Closing the building was discussed, but no action was taken at that time.

By the time the issue came before the 2004 Annual Conference for final approval, however, there was no question. The previous year's statistics showed a total membership of 13 and an average worship attendance of 5. In addition, the building was in need of major repair. After bearing their loads for more than a century, the old walls were bowing to the point where rods and straps could no longer guarantee the integrity of the structure or the safety of its occupants. At the writing of this article, it appears that the property will be sold to the adjacent landowners and the building torn down.

But there remains one final piece to the story, a piece that reminds us that the church is the people of God and that God is still active. In 1995, Pine Grove and its two closest neighbors were moved from the Three Springs charge and made a part of the Sideling Hill parish. Since that time, the pastor of Pine Grove has been Rev. George Clippinger.

Rev. Clippinger is a full-time local pastor. A 1973 graduate of Delaware Valley College of Science and Agriculture with a degree in agronomy, he worked in construction and as a dairy farmer before being recommended for the ministry by Siloam UMC of Fulton County's Harrisonville charge. He received his local preacher's license in 1995 and has since completed his studies at Wesley Theological Seminary. Sideling Hill is his first assignment.

But more germane to the story of Pine Grove Church is the relationship between the Reverends William A. Clippinger and George Clippinger, the pastor who helped erect the building in 1881 and the one who oversaw its retirement from service in 2004. The Wilson Montgomery Clippinger who lost two sons to typhoid in 1883 and who was a brother to Rev. William A. Clippinger, was the great-grandfather of Rev. George Clippinger.

And given the fact that Rev. George Clippinger's grandfather Wilson Montgomery Clippinger Jr (1869-1971) and father Samuel Wilson Clippinger (1909-2002) lived to be 102 and 93 years respectively, one can't help but think that the Clippinger influence will be present in Fulton County for years to come. And so while buildings and organized congregations can definitely enhance ministry, the closing of a church is not necessarily the end of the story. May the influence of the Pine Grove Church, in the form of those whose lives she has touched, continue to call people to Christ.